

Kevin Concannon, "Rhys Chatham and Joseph Nechvatal," *Art New England*,
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Real Time/Reel Time
Performance and Sound Art/Boston
Rhys Chatham & Joseph Nechvatal: XS

Real Time/Reel Time focuses on performance and sound art. Works discussed will generally be those presented via a time-based media, be it a multimedia theater performance, a recording, or, somewhat less frequently I think, film and video.

After a year of preparation and the approaching collapse of the Brattle Performance Series (its funded sponsor), XS materialized on the stage of the Boston Shakespeare Company recently. XS might well have been titled in reference to the sheer volume of the sound system; cotton balls were provided in the lobby for the more sensitive members of the audience. XS (excess), however, referred more universally to the proliferation of electronics, information, and other technology of contemporary American culture.

XS reflected the chaos of our culture, the multitude of different "narratives," without fixing on any one in particular. It distilled and intensified the fabric of contemporary culture. Opposed to the current trend of postmodern appropriation, XS cut to the heart of a modern dilemma: the frustration produced by the ever-increasing, and sometimes intimidating, technology. Because the "opera" resists the appropriation strategy that so frequently trivializes performance work to the level of *Saturday Night Live*, it seemed almost formal/modernist in its subtle, and I believe effective, handling of the social fabric.

Against a scrim, on which the visual art of Joseph Nechvatal was projected, Yves Musard and company danced with, but not necessarily to, the music of Rhys Chatham. Collaborators Nechvatal and Chatham conceived of XS as an "opera," a term that many considered at the very least inappropriate; some thought it excessively pretentious. While I'm hard put to defend such a label, I found the piece extremely engaging if somewhat less than perfect. The major complaint heard as the crowd dispersed was that it failed as an opera, for two specific reasons. First, the work exhibited not even the faintest narrative thread or story line, certainly a basic condition of anything purporting to be opera. Secondly, the live singers were not up to operatic snuff. On this second point, I must defer to the opera connoisseurs. As for the former, while it's true that the work offered nothing approaching a "story," to dismiss this production simply because of terminology seems more ridiculous than the notion that it constituted opera.

The audience tended to see the piece according to its own various biases, as audiences quite naturally do. Anticipating a dance/new music concert or a visual-art exhibition inevitably lead to disappointment; slide projections and recorded music threatened to "cheat" much of the crowd from the start. The apparent distance and dislocation characteristic of the technological reproduction/presentation constitutes the formal bond between the music and the visual art.

XS, far from a "failed opera," transcends the prevailing arch despair of the East Village.

Kevin Concannon