

By Kyle Gann

If you take 24 squares of dimensions one by one, two by two, three by three, and so on up to 24 by 24, what's the smallest square they'll all fit into? Based on the sum of their areas, they *should* fit into a 70 by 70 square, but they don't. You can fit 23 of them; in fact, there are 24 different ways to arrange the 23, and in every case it's the seven by seven square that's left out.

Ed Harkins explained this to a small audience at Roulette March 25, and then he and Phil Larson allegedly demonstrated how it works. They lunged toward each other with weird, robotic motions, stabbing their fingers at the air and at each other, ending with an elaborate ritual handshake. If the audience missed the geometrical solution, they covered by laughing their heads off.

Had John Cleese and Eric Idle left Monty Python to devote their careers to performing Stockhausen and Midwest-American avant-garde music, they couldn't have been much funnier than the pair who bill themselves under the typographically disarming moniker [THE]. When I first saw [THE] in '82, the duo began with a film of themselves, decked out in full golfers' regalia, playing an arduous nine-hole set in some barren Western mountain range. The Roulette gig was lower-tech but higher-concept. Sappy Muzak played as they entered. Harkins (actually an expert trumpeter) played one note over and over with different mouthpieces. Vocalist Larson made high, squealing sounds and lip-synched to a tape. Without looking, they'd toss pencils at each other, then reload their pockets with dozens more;



BONNIE HARKINS

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through most of the performance the pencils stuck out of their pockets like bombs waiting to go off.

Harkins was the front man; Larson often just sat looking dazed and intense. Harkins did a dummy-less ventriloquist act (finishing with the lip-banging word *bulb*) and tried to see how many mouthpieces he could pick up off a table with his lips. He whispered enigmatic dialogue, then played a tape of the Western movie it came from. He spoke probably fake Japanese, which Larson ostensibly translated. Stiff as Python's Mr. Gumbys, the pair did a pointlessly minimalist fan dance to a rock tape. The gags weren't delivered one by one as in stand-up comedy, but in the kind of Cagean

counterpoint familiar to anyone who followed '70s theater pieces. Many of the jokes asymptotically approached a punchline that never arrived, others exploded. When Harkins took his trumpet apart to play each piece and used a plunger mute to blow air backward through the horn and make his hair jump, the house fell down.

If Harkins and Larson were just being silly, they'd still be worth their newsprint. But to someone who lived through the original, they are so close to the reality of the conceptualist avant-garde that spread in the '60s and '70s through midwestern universities—U. of Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Oberlin, and thence to California—that it's difficult to

distinguish the satire from a possibly more serious undercurrent. (Larson is an Illinois product, Harkins from Yale and Iowa; both teach at U. of California at San Diego.) With nonsensically ornate diagrams as props, Harkins droned in perfect '70s academes about "complex systems of simultaneous periodicities," Alfred Korzybski's "structural differential," and that ubiquitously trendy theorist Leonard Meyer. Everything was grounded ad absurdum in a plethora of ratiocination, to which the insane result bore no resemblance whatsoever. And that, folks, is what much of the '70s was really like.

Because the rational part, here as in real life, was never really

fake. Harkins and Larson did one bit I'd seen before, a vaudeville of synchronized body movements. They fiddled with invisible binoculars, chopped haltingly at body parts, struggled with imaginary ropes pulling them from behind, and barked in unison. While this went on, John Fonville went to an overhead projector and shined a diagram of the piece's rhythmic structure: it was actually well worked out, a kind of offbeat rhythmic process changing tempo in tricky meters. You could follow the rhythm in what they were doing. But if you didn't know to look for some underlying abstraction, you'd think Larson and Harkins were simply possessed by identical demons, trying to fight their way out of their own bodies.

It's a shame to see such a great shtick fade in relevance. (Love to see someone this uninhibited similarly deconstruct the assumptions of '80s improv.) That may be a New York perspective; on the West Coast, conceptualist music theater may still be ripe for deflation. Certainly this audience grasped the subtleties. If you knew how many Midwest percussion ensemble pieces lowered a struck gong into a tank of water to effect some minuscule change in the sound, then you died laughing when Harkins plinked a finger cymbal and then dipped it in a teacup. One quotation summed up a whole panorama in the late-20th-century American avant-garde. "As Miles Davis has said," Harkins mused, "I don't like furniture . . . and I don't like corners. And neither do you." To those of us who spent 1976 feverishly reading Roger Reynolds's *Mind Models* and wondering what the hell he was getting at, [THE] makes perfect sense. ■

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