

Patricia Nicholson and William Parker: Endless Vision

By Nate Chinen

Idealism, Pragmatism: each force is often cast in opposition to the other, irreconcilable and absolute. But in aesthetics as well as in politics, the dichotomy proves fallible, if not exactly false. A conversation with dancer-choreographer Patricia Nicholson and bassist-composer William Parker, chief stewards of the Vision Festival, brings this moral tangle into view. Over the last 15 years, they have built a community through idealistic intentions, and increasingly practical operations. Nicholson puts the tension in clear terms, with a twinge of self-conscious agita. Pragmatic idealism, it turns out, may be the only way to keep a thing like Vision going.

Most progressive jazz citizens in New York, and many from points beyond, have looked to the Vision Festival as an anchor of rugged independence in an ocean of conformity. There is no equivalent event for free jazz and avant-garde music in the United States, which lends Vision a singular, summit-like air. The festival has encouraged this impression over the years, sincerely hailing its elders—Bill Dixon and Fred Anderson, who both died this summer, were recent Lifetime Achievement honorees—while clearing pockets of space for select new arrivals. While the marquee festival ecosystem in New York has seen its share of upheaval, the Vision Festival endures and abides.

That perseverance isn't arbitrary, as Nicholson will take pains to remind you. Along with Parker, her husband, she sits on the board of Arts for Art, Inc., a nonprofit organization dedicated to the presentation of avant-garde music and art. (Encouraging a sense of community is another priority of the organization—it's part of the mission statement, in those precise words.) Nicholson and Parker have subtly distinct perspectives on the festival and its work, rooted in their differences of training and temperament. Parker, a collegial instigator among musicians, gladly emphasizes performance, the finished product; Nicholson, who functions more behind-the-scenes, fending more requests and complaints, speaks first of the meticulous effort that goes into the event every year.

I sat down with Nicholson and Parker on a blazing August afternoon, in the main room of their second-floor East Village apartment. At first only Parker was there, on the phone discussing business with a fellow musician, as he cleared a sewing machine and spools of thread from the table. Then Nicholson showed up, having walked a handful of blocks from the Arts for Art office. The room was modestly and comfortably appointed, with enough space in the middle of the floor for a dancer to work out ideas. Along one exposed-brick wall, over the fireplace, there were a number of stringed instruments, including the Malian ngonis that Parker has taken to incorporating in performance.

We spoke for about an hour, with some digressions and disagreement. "Were you surprised by anything we said?" Nicholson asked afterward, as I was headed out the door. Yes, I replied: I'd been struck by something she said about the relative narrow-

mindedness of the core Vision Festival audience, which balked one year to see the saxophonist David “Fathead” Newman on the bill.

Community means many things, but it doesn’t have to mean openness to all comers. That’s the pragmatic side talking, but it could just as well be the idealistic side, standing up for what it believes to be true.