

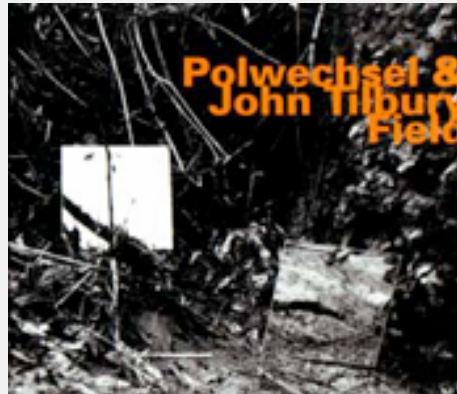
Dusted Reviews

Artist: Polwechsel & John Tilbury

Album: Field

Label: Hatology

Review date: Jul. 24, 2009



Polwechsel's recruitment of AMM pianist John Tilbury to play on their sixth album would be a crassly obvious step if the results weren't so grand. The mainly Middle European ensemble, which slimmed down to a quartet after making this record (double bassist Werner Dafeldecker, cellist Michael Moser, and percussionists Martin Brandlmayr and Burkhard Beins are still around; saxophonist John Butcher has left) was founded to accomplish a mission; to bring improvisational aesthetics and associated sounds into composition.

The notion isn't as remarkable as it was when they started 15 years ago. The ensemble's preference for measured, minimal gestures over the expressionism that founding member Radu Malfatti once indulged has become so codified in other hands that you can pick your name for it (Reductionism, New London Silence, Onkyo). Tilbury is an improviser whose playing is inevitably compared to the work of composer Morton Feldman, which is fine as far as it goes – Tilbury once made an ace quadruple CD of the man's piano works – but ignores the many other things he does equally well.

Field's first piece "Place, Replace, Represent" resembles a concerto because Tilbury's sublime passes over the keyboard so ably occupy the foreground while the rest of Polwechsel stick to measured rasps and isolated strikes. But the closer you listen, the more interweave is apparent. The percussionists' stark beats fall into the tonal and procedural paths of Tilbury's prepared piano; his inside-the-box glisses join the thatch of frictional string and drum-skin voicings. More illusory ghosts emerge as recorded piano chords play through a second piano and out through speakers into the studio air, where Tilbury's figures creep around them. The saxophone sighs, shadowed infinitesimally by the strings.

In "Fields," the album's second half, the musicians swap their already sparingly used notes in favor of sounds and the music becomes even more detailed. The six

players deploy creaks, knocks, purrs and elongated slides as thoughtfully and essentially as they did the first piece's identifiable instrumental sounds, forming carefully dimensioned surfaces that encircle the listener until you find yourself deep inside the music, only to make the surfaces disappear into an emptiness articulated by thin wiry glides. Tilbury reasserts his instrument's identity 16 minutes in, essaying cut-short chords against a bright flair of mechanically stimulated cymbals. Nothing, he seems to say, has been forgotten, but nothing will be thrown wholesale and thoughtless into the mix.

Despite its spare sound this is total music, aware of near and distant pasts, open to a breadth of methods and sounds, dramatic and rich and complete.

By Bill Meyer