

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 9, 1977

New Music: Kitchen Ritual

NED SUBLETTE'S musico-theatrical performance Wednesday night at the Kitchen, called "Voice, Low Strings, Chromelodeon, Tape, Hair, Clothes, Bone" was exactly that. It was also, even for us devotees of conceptual and meditative art, an instance of a good idea that went on rather too long.

What Mr. Sublette and his collaborators did was construct an altarlike pile of boxes on which burning candles and bones (including a human skull) were deployed ritualistically. Mr. Sublette sat behind this assemblage dressed and

coifed like a monk, and behind him were a cellist (Martha Siegel) and a violist (Elizabeth Sublette).

The so-called "symmetrical performance" consisted of two 35-minute halves. In the first half Mr. Sublette read page after page of text, supported by a low drone of cello and electronic instrument (the chromelodeon) and punctuated between pages by simple roulades from the viola. The second half consisted of the first half played back backward on tape.

But the gimmick was this: Mr. Sublette had laboriously practiced his text

such that he could read it backward, just as if his live reading were a natural reading played backward on a tape recorder. Thus his own reading in the first half was a bizarre assortment of abrupt attacks, unnatural decays, alien singsongs and guttural sounds unheard in any normal language—made all the odder by a peculiar singsong semi-chanting. The playback, in turn, sounded almost odder—sometimes comprehensible, sometimes not-so-comprehensible words, spoken as through a veil.

Much of this was very powerful. The first half was like a close encounter

of whatever kind; the playback was like synthesized speech, or an alchemical ritual. Key words seemed to recur, with "ashes" and "bone" and "hell" cropping up continually. Although whole phrases sometimes emerged clearly, the continuous line of the narration remained obscured, and fascinatingly so.

But the trouble was that after one got the idea, each half simply went on too long. The setting and the sounds weren't compelling enough to provide abstract pleasure over that long a span, nor did they evolve or shift sufficiently to vary the effect. JOHN ROCKWELL