Cross Platform





Left: Cecil Taylor on film. Right: Ben Rubin & Mark Hansen's Listening Post installation at Villette Numérique

CECIL TAYLOR: ALL THE NOTES

CHRISTOPHER FELVER (DIRECTOR)

BY ROB YOUNG

Director Christopher Felver has made it his mission to document firebrand movements and personalities from contemporary art, poetry and music before they die out unrecorded. He has made sterling films on the Black Mountain school of poetry, has biographised Beat meister Lawrence Ferlinghetti, John Cage and boho wordsmiths in 1984's West Coast: Beats And Beyond. Last year he turned his attention to the media-shy, towering free jazz figure of Cecil Taylor. Economy of means - a set-up using one or two DV cams at most - allowed Felver to get up close and personal with the pianist, gaining unprecedented access to Taylor's Brooklyn home/workplace, nailing his frequent stentorian pronouncements on life, art, music and childhood memories, as well as shadowing him to various concert engagements, teaching gigs in California, and a trip backstage to meet old friend Mal Waldron

To say Taylor is larger than life is an understatement. His musicianship is informed by a deep intellectual underpinning. One of the earliest sequences shows him seated at his grand piano, poring over a book of architecture and discussing his pianism in terms of structural integrity on the same level as bridge spans. His scores, unhooked from the stave paper and using "not notes - alphabets", look more like calculus that might, for example, tell you the density of suns. Many insights into his complex superclustered playing are gleaned: that for example he has forsaken standard intervals such as the perfect fourth and fifth, that he is interested in perfecting contrary motions of the hands; and that he spends hours each day playing his piano at home, staring at the movements of a tree that grows right outside his window.

He cuts a delightfully unconventional stance throughout. In one of many unnervingly straight-to-camera addresses ('interview' would falsely imply an exchange of views), he confesses his childhood love of Judy Garland's songs, and in other passages he is nightgowned and wool-hatted,

resembling Gloria Swanson in Sunset Boulevard. In the film's most enduring image, he prepares for a night at the Blue Note club by pirouetting round his living room to Ella Fitzgerald, clad in knickerbockers, a silver jacket and bright orange baseball cap. Balletic is an appropriate word to describe his playing, too, and we see a good deal of him at work on stage, his fingers nimble as a pair of randy moths, then savage and heavy as a ravening lion, unerringly striking their ivory targets, and leaving fellow musicians stranded somewhere back on the highway.

Students at Mills College, where Taylor has a regular teaching gig, devise an avant garde 'free composition' under his generous tutelage. But here and during a later sequence of a big band convened for his birthday in 2002, Cecil always thrums away at the back of the stage, bobbing about to his own rhythm, apparently oblivious to the plodders struggling to keep pace. It's not a problem. "If they say boo," he remarks of difficult audiences, "I'll give them something to REALLY boo about!"

All The Notes, while occasionally irritatingly edited (split screen simultaneity smacks of a fashionable reaction to Mike Figgis's *Timecode*), is an intimate portrait of a consummate musician and sound thinker in triumphant maturity, bringing out Taylor's nobility, devotion and belief in a truth that can only be found after a lifetime of invention.

VILLETTE NUMÉRIQUE PARIS VARIOUS VENUES

BY RAHMA KHAZAM

Launched in 2002, Paris's biennial Villette
Numérique festival is already making a name for
itself on the digital arts circuit. Over two weeks in
autumn, on a much bigger scale, this second
edition addressed more established artforms
such as electronic music and animation, but also
less familiar ones such as mixed media
performance and digital artworks. Meanwhile a
programme exploring Stockhausen's electronic
music gave the festival a historical dimension.

The extensive Stockhausen programme included films and workshops as well as a discussion bringing together Can founder and

former Stockhausen student Irmin Schmidt, his collaborator (and son-in-law) Jono Podmore aka Kumo, and David Toop. These events were backed up by concerts staging such stunning 1960s compositions as *Kontakte*, the monumental *Hymnen*, built up from national anthems, and *Mixtur*, a mesmerising experiment in live electronics in which Ensemble Intercontemporain's instrumental sounds were altered by ring modulators, yielding astonishingly harsh, metallic sounds.

Stockhausen can be a hard act to follow. On this occasion, his music showed up the shortcomings of some of the other musical offerings. Fennesz's performance got off to a good start as warm, mellow guitar notes clashed with a harsh electronic undertow, although it gradually lost its direction and drive. Sigur Rós performed their largescale 'composition' Odin's Raven Magic. a visual and sonic adaptation of ancient Icelandic sagas fusing traditional and electronic music, conceived with ex-Psychic TV member and Icelandic folklorist Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson. The piece was performed by a choir, an orchestra and a stone marimba and augmented by mysterious shadowy images that gave it a strong poetic dimension. Yet the ingredients failed to gel, mainly on account of the repetitive, overblown melodies and the soulful orchestral passages.

The Zone De Confluences exhibition, on the other hand, was an unqualified success, testifying to the diversity and creativity of digital art. Atau Tanaka's Bondage was a poetic installation on the theme of inaccessibility. A scanned image of a Japanese woman projected on a screen was resynthesized as haunting, slowly moving sounds. As they moved in front of the screen, visitors modified the sound and image, uncovering sections of the original black and white photograph for a few tantalising moments at a time. Yet given the impossibility of uncovering the photograph in its entirety, te woman ultimately remained inaccessible.

Equally fascinating was Ben Rubin and Mark Hansen's Listening Post, which alluded to the difficulty of communicating via the Internet. It used rows of tiny screens to display fragments of messages retrieved in real time from Internet chat rooms. These fragments were read out by a vocal

synthesizer as they appeared on the screens, giving rise to a disjointed conversation between Net surfers who weren't actually addressing each other.

David Rokeby's N-CHA(n)T consisted of seven computers, each equipped with a microphone and a screen showing an ear. When visitors spoke into the microphones, the computers always misunderstood: they responded by uttering words that sounded similar but were not the same. The piece emphasised the illusory nature of artificial intelligence, and man's difficult relationship with machines. JoDi's My%Desktop was similarly critical of technology. It presented four giant computer screens, each of them continually on the blink. In a state of constant chaos and change, the menus and icons on each screen created a mesmerising acoustic and visual imbroglio. Meanwhile, the Radical Software Group's contribution included a series of DVDs of famous paintings projected on screens. These images were subjected to disconcerting changes: the effect of the constantly disappearing and reappearing apples of a still life by Cézanne, for instance, was

disorientating in the extreme. The computer's ability to manipulate sounds and images is bringing about an unprecedented rapprochement beween the two media. In Kasper T Toeplitz's mixed media performance Capture. the movements of three dancer/musicians triggered sounds and images, enabling them to play a score and control the projection of video images on the two screens beside them. The dancers traced infinitesimally slow movements in the air, their bodies locked into strange, contorted positions, while fleeting ghost-like images swept across the screens and a menacing roll of thunder filled the air. Display Pixel 3, a collaboration between French artists Vincent Epplay and Antoine Schmitt, featured moving white shapes on a black background. It was reminiscent of Oskar Fischinger's 1930s experimental film studies of time and motion. The hypnotic interplay between the audioreactive images and Epplay's minimal, perfectly synchronised live mix of beats, knocks and tinkles drew the audience in. Sound and image were as one.

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