

Panel: Venues, Institutions, Publics

Chair: Christine Bold

Tamas Dobozy

Abstract

Cecil Taylor Comes to Alice Tully Hall

On March 26, 1994, Cecil Taylor rented Alice Tully Hall, part of the Lincoln Centre complex in New York City, for his 65th Birthday concert, a solo show that cost him \$15,000 dollars to mount. The concert was controversial not only for the fact that Taylor himself underwrote the costs, but because of the jazz programming at Lincoln Centre that Taylor was pointedly defying. His exclusion from the Lincoln Centre up to that point in time was justified by the center's "artistic consultant," Stanley Crouch, who said, "Even though he [Cecil Taylor] improvises, he does not swing." Taylor's rebuttal was to wonder whether the Lincoln Centre even *had* a jazz department, suggesting that his definition of jazz was completely at odds with that of Crouch and the Lincoln Centre programmers. In this case, the divergent attitudes toward what does and does not constitute jazz were symptomatic of an even greater concern, namely, the way in which institutional codes, in this case the troublesome notion of "swing" as the essential generic feature of jazz, serve as barriers, transforming aesthetic considerations into political ones. It is not the aim of this essay to tackle the history of programming at Jazz at the Lincoln Centre, but rather to consider the extra-musical implications of Taylor's challenge to the status quo in his performance at Alice Tully Hall – how his musical practice enacts a politics at odds with the premises upon which institutionalization depends. Taylor's challenge, then, is not just to the Lincoln Centre, or to codified notions of jazz, but to a way of organizing the arts, and, by extension, to the ways in which such organization impacts upon aesthetic exchange, access to institutional resources, and, ultimately, community. In undertaking this question – the point at which genre becomes law – the paper will consider the legacy of the "New Thing," "The Avant-Garde," "Black Classical Music," or any of the other titles under which the jazz of 1960s players such as Taylor, Coltrane, Dolphy, Coleman, and others came to be known. These musicians not only radically questioned the existing aesthetic structures of jazz but also *jazz as a structure*, as a codified form, and in doing so articulated a continually emergent notion of culture – where culture adapts itself to community need vis-a-vis material contingency, or the historical moment – that made their artistic practice incompatible with the preservationist doctrine of arts administrators such as Stanley Crouch. While critics such as Amiri Baraka, Frank Kofsky, and even more recently, Iain Anderson, have suggested that the most salient social characteristic of the music of avant-gardists such as Cecil Taylor was its protest against racial segregation, exploitation and discrimination, there is also a utopian aspect to the music – one that seeks a

politics of *doing* (or process) over a politics of *being* (or definition), in which the notion of what Baraka calls "kinetic philosophy," or constant change, serves, paradoxically to preserve African American culture against the power of institutions that seek to conceptually contain, and ultimately arrest, artistic practice. It is precisely this conflict, and its implications for the relationship between a community and its historical moment, that Cecil Taylor played upon when he came to play at Alice Tully Hall.

Biography

Tamas Dobozy is an associate professor in the Department of English and Film Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University. He has published on John Coltrane, Toni Morrison, Philip Roth, Charles Bukowski, and Raymond Carver in journals such as *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Philip Roth Studies*, *Mosaic*, and *Canadian Literature*. He has also published two books of stories, *When X Equals Marylou* (Arsenal Pulp 2002), and *Last Notes* (HarperCollins 2005). He lives in Kitchener, Ont.

John Maclean

Abstract

The Open Council: What is the potential of a self-institution to provide alternative institutional framing devices to contextualise critical art practice?

Many artists believe that mainstream institutions for the exhibition and dissemination of art have lost the ability to perform a critical function and that new critical strategies and contexts are urgently needed (Heise & Jakobsen, 2001; Sheikh, 2004). My presentation will introduce an art project that seeks to develop such a context through investigating the potential of a self-institution to provide an alternative space to frame critical art practice. As part of this project the relationship between improvisatory practices in music and participatory practices in art that seek to develop and maintain critical spaces has been examined. Strategies drawn from the various structural developments in jazz music have been employed in practice to help create and maintain the self-institution while the socio-political history of jazz music as a site of opposition and resistance has informed the theoretical side of the project. The research attempts to build bridges between the points where improvisational and critical art practices have shared similar critical focus and practical strategy over the years, culminating in the contemporary situation where the social function of both art and music are being explored by artists and at an institutional level.

The project has been influenced by the strategies of self-institutionalisation as pioneered in the Copenhagen Free University project in which art activity is re-framed as knowledge production. My research involves a similar re-framing but rather than a university, art activities are presented as social policies through the framework of a fictional local authority called the Open Council (www.opencouncil.co.uk) which is positioned to reflect the genuine local authority in the area which is Newcastle City Council. This positioning of self-

institution to adjacent institution is the base upon which the critical context emerges and is sustained. By placing the emphasis on the framing of activity as opposed to individual works, self-institution is a strategy that provides a naturally experimental and multi-disciplinary space which has the ability to drift in and out of art and non-art contexts and in this respect has much in common with the idea of the 'counter public sphere'.

The Open Council aims to construct a critical space in which alternative dialogues and imaginings can be articulated. Once established, this space can then function as a framing device that puts a critical spin on the multi-disciplinary activities that occur within it. This is achieved in practice by developing 'experimental polices' that re-imagine the urban environment and social/power relations in society. These 'fictional' policies are featured on the Open Council website and exist as council leaflets which borrow the look and language of Newcastle City Council's leaflets and provide social comment on life, culture and the powers that be in Newcastle. In this way the Open Council employs strategies of humour and *detournment* to articulate a playful critique of power and ubiquitous notions of social participation that are particularly prevalent in U.K. culture, policy, and in the mass media.

Biography

John Maclean is an artist from Newcastle, England. He is currently on the third year of a practice-led PhD project at Newcastle University which investigates the potential of musical improvisation strategies to be used in critical art practice. John's interests are in projects that explore the social function of art and music from the perspectives of both artists and institutions. John is the founding member of the Open Council self institution and author of *Open Council – "Pretend the World is Different."* He is also a wildly enthusiastic amateur musician.

Website: www.opencouncil.co.uk

Fabien Barontini

Abstract

Improvised music and the French cultural establishment

The relationship between the French cultural and political establishment and improvised music could be summarized in three steps. The first one began with the introduction of jazz in France, when this music was played in clubs and music halls only, and was still quite autonomous in front of the power that be. Eventually, it gave birth in France to another original music: gypsy jazz, as created by Django Reinhardt and his folks. A second stage happened in the '60s and the '70s when jazz, free jazz and improvised music were tied to revolutionary socio-cultural movements and organizations. A third stage was reached in the '80s when French public administrations and policies recognized the value of improvised music and started to support the field. From now on, the

world of improvised music, in France, had to face a centralized and homogenizing state. We do benefit from institutional support, but we also have to deal with repeated attempts to alienate or quell the creativity in the music.

Biography

Fabien Barontini was born in 1954 in Paris. He became a French teacher, then started to work around jazz and creative music in the 1980s, until he created the Sons d'hiver Festival in 1991. He still works as the director of the festival today.

Website: www.sonsdhiver.org