

On Screen

Films & DVDs

Soldier Of The Road: A Portrait Of Peter Brötzmann

Bernard Josse (Director)

Cinesolo DVD 2011, 93 mins

By this point in his life, Peter Brötzmann must be heartily tired of military metaphor. Yet Bernard Josse's uninspired portrait of the saxophonist at 70 refuses to let a good cliché go, even four decades after his epochal *Machine Gun*.

Critical parlance on Brötzmann commonly swings between two poles: the wall-destroying force and the (wow!) emotional sensitivity of an artist whose art continually refuses any kind of simplistic binary. Josse's film does little to redress the balance, juxtaposing 'wild' contemporary footage with shots of the artist at one with nature, drinking tea, tending flowers,

photographing plants. The film opens with live footage of his Full Blast Trio. Boring is not a term you would usually associate with a Brötzmann performance, but whether it's something to do with the editing, or the director's feeling that a headless electric bass and a drummer with zero concept of swing is somehow more bluntly radical than an acoustic jazz quartet, the clip feels endlessly extended and simplistic in its equation of energy and form. Indeed, none of the contemporary performances included in the documentary seems quintessentially 'Brötzmann', which says a lot for the director's feel for his subject.

Throughout, the film focuses on Brötzmann as a European, but really he's an internationalist, a pan-cultural artist who never forsakes his own identity as a German,

as he eloquently points out in his interview, but who more than any other European improviser has an umbilical link to American and, latterly, World Music modes. The lack of any commentary from close collaborators Hamid Drake and William Parker, key players in Die Like A Dog, a group that functions as the fulcrum of his back catalogue, serves to further skew the portrait, though the amazing black and white snaps of the early FMP sessions, and particularly his duo sojourn with Han Bennink through the wilds of the Black Forest as documented on the *Schwarzwaldfahrt* album, make the lack of any archival footage all the more frustrating. Still, there are some illuminating interviews, especially from Bennink and Evan Parker.

The appeal of Brötzmann's art lies in its complexity, its inscrutability; its

unwillingness to reveal itself via the simplistic keys that pass for artistic persona in the arts. As such, Josse's portrait is a reductive vision of an artist who has eschewed cliché throughout his career, and who is no more a soldier than he is a gardener, no more a visual artist than a musician. In the days of YouTube and Facebook and the self-conscious marketing of consumable personality, Brötzmann remains a bulwark against reductive interpretation. Thankfully, despite Josse's determination to portray him as a mere iconoclast, Brötzmann slips free of the clichéd profile the director places before him. The chance to make the definitive document of the man's life and art is sacrificed to simplicity.

David Keenan

Otomo Yoshihide

Ensembles 2010: Resonance

Art Tower Mito DVD 2011, 91 mins

"Every time I form a band," says Otomo Yoshihide in the notes to this release, "what comes to my mind is the Duke Ellington Orchestra. They emanated a sound that could only be his, but at the same time individual members such as Johnny Hodges and Cootie Williams clearly stood out. Together they produced music that went freely beyond the boundaries of what we think jazz may be." Otomo has run his Ensembles project since 2008, with an emphasis on public participation; a broadening out of his usual concerns to embrace both amateur and pro musicians, non-musicians, the public, the street and even museum curators. The Art Tower museum space in Mito, a city 80 miles north

east of Tokyo, invited Otomo to think big over four months in 2010–11, and this film coolly documents the whole thing: exhibitions of sound art, concerts, parades, workshops for "people with intellectual disabilities", busking and a musical battle in a gallery full of water.

We commence with an outdoor concert: Ko Ishikawa's sho outside a shrine, while cicadas sing and Otomo knocks up homebrewed gagaku from gongs, guitar and gamelan. This is excellent music, worth an album release on its own. Then a dozen groups – children's brass, kazoo merchants, soccer cheerleaders and Chindonya street advertisers – assemble for a noisy parade, though the sudden arrival of a typhoon downpour confines them to the museum premises. Self-playing instruments fill the museum – a piano

played by a toy cow is memorable – and one gallery brims over with tape and portable record decks, a red and gold Aladdin's cave of playback devices. More concerts seem to spill out all over the city, and the Otoasobi (sound-play) project visits from Kobe, featuring children with learning difficulties making music alongside members of the public. Otomo's Double Orchestra is a two-fold conduction project, large-scale improvised carnival music like Stockhausen's *Gruppen* on lager. Otomo collaborators such as Tenniscoats, Ami Yoshida and Seiichi Yamamoto have cameo roles throughout.

It takes some nerve to lead such a community-oriented project and maintain artistic integrity, but Otomo and his curator Yuu Takehisa clearly have nerve, and the citizens of Mito seem to burst with

collaborative goodwill. Does this kind of civic-minded collaboration come naturally to the Japanese? (Ensembles 2010 concludes two months before the March 2011 earthquake, which damaged Mito badly.) Quite apart from British community arts funding being slashed, it's hard to imagine a project like this flowering in the UK. And yet the Otoasobi performance reminded me vividly of a hilarious recent production of *Macbeth* by Haringey Shed, my local, slashed-funding community theatre working with disadvantaged kids. This DVD manages to pack a lot into 90 minutes: a snapshot of Japanese experimental music, a survey of the various ways people make music in one city, even perhaps a moving portrait of contemporary Japanese society.

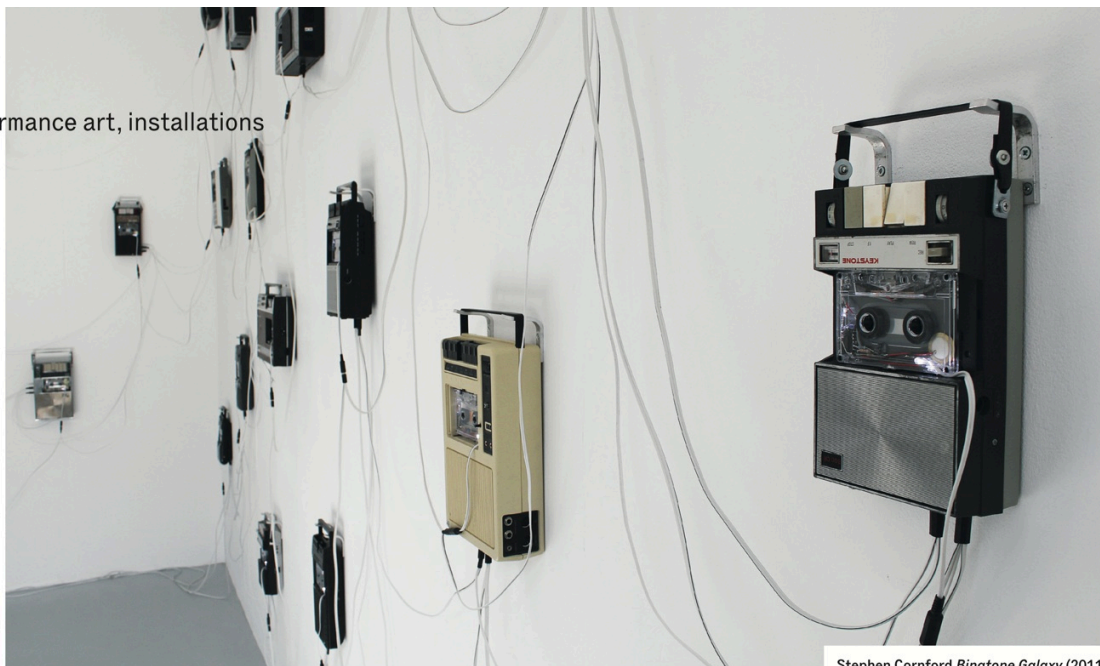
Clive Bell

Ensemble play: Tenniscoats at the Art Tower, Mito, Japan



On Site

Exhibitions, performance art, installations



Stephen Cornford *Binatone Galaxy* (2011)

Stephen Cornford *Binatone Galaxy*

Campbell Works, London, UK

On the walls of a white room, brightly illuminated with natural light, Stephen Cornford, an artist who describes his work existing at the “intersection of sculpture and music”, has mounted some 30 old cassette recorders. Models from Boots, Sanyo, Robotic, one lone and gorgeously named *Binatone Galaxy*: they all hang on the walls, wired up, tapes loaded and ready for action. Smitten by an attack of technological melancholia, the visitor can wonder who owned these things, what pop charts did these machines once record? Were they ever placed next to pillows, late at night, for surreptitious listening pleasures? What

happened to the voices that once rubbed the magnetic heads of these little machines?

For some artists, the speed (and resulting impact) of obsolescence on the technology that we once took for granted has spawned a form of fetishism, in which the voices – the human agency – they once recorded exist in an alternate, ghostly dimension, a reminder of what once was. This is not Cornford’s theme. The fact that each audio cassette in his machines is fitted with a motion sensor and a contact mic, so that, on entry, the machines whirr into action, indicates that *Binatone Galaxy* is very much of the here and now. Yes, Cornford has chosen old, cheap and accessible technology with which to realise this, but I suspect that he is aiming for a fur4554uuuzy audio intimacy.

The sensitivity of the mics is such that Cornford achieves this well. Each audio cassette becomes not simply a means of playback, but its own indeterminate instrument. It works as long as there is movement to activate it – and like Alvin Lucier’s *I Am Sitting In A Room*, a soundwork which places sonic decay at its heart, each little soundworld within *Binatone Galaxy* ripples out to form continually newer and fainter ones. It doesn’t take long for the noises generated by the playback operations to suggest their own fantasised sounds: the clapping of horses’ hooves on the cobblestones outside is one (Campbell Works is situated in a former Stoke Newington brewery); a pulsating brassy sound is another. The effects are

surprisingly rich in timbre and intensity. The visitor becomes an unwitting conductor, as sensors will switch off unless continually activated, so tempi and volume change constantly. Combined, there is a continual kinetic activity and rhythm to the piece.

There is a practice of deliberate, anarchic displacement, an effort to place things where they shouldn’t be, that is central to Cornford’s work. It’s in *Trespassing The Olympic Site*, a series of actions in which he tried (with varying success) to penetrate Fortress Olympics in East London, as much as in *Battery Acid*, scored for car battery, wires and mic cables. The results are not only playful, but a necessary retaliation to all forms of authority, audio and otherwise.

Loise Gray

Jennie C Jones *Absorb/Diffuse*

The Kitchen, New York City, USA

Jennie C Jones’s *Absorb/Diffuse* is an exploration of graphic notation as an immersive sensory experience. The show, exhibited at the Kitchen in New York from 8 September to 29 October, includes two works: a series of paintings using absorber and diffuser panels entitled *Acoustic Paintings* (2011) and a sound composition, *From The Low* (2011), broadcast through the gallery on a four channel sound system. Motivated by the notable lack of African-Americans in the modernist canon, Jones sees her practice as an attempt to draw out the parallels between the march of modernist art in the 20th century, especially in the United States, and the developments of avant garde jazz during this same period. Both movements share a focus on abstraction and stripped down, minimalist forms – approaches central to much of Jones’s work.

Graphic notation, in many instances, permits a freeing up of interpretation by

the player, but *Absorb/Diffuse* suggests removing the musician from the process altogether to allow the symbol to ‘speak’ in conjunction with its surroundings. Constituted from soundproofing materials, The graphic symbols found in the *Acoustic Paintings* have the capacity to silence the deep reverberations of *From The Low*. Their sound-cancelling properties subtly interplay with the amplified piece, ultimately enclosing the viewer within the composition itself.

The placement of *Acoustic Paintings* is strategic: large rectangular blocks are placed on the wall around the gallery, with measured blank spots between them. The geometrically precise placement of these stark blocks possesses a strong visual correspondence to Morton Feldman’s graphic notation for his *Projections* (1951), and the effect, seen from further away, indicates that they are indeed part of a larger score. A number of the paintings layer the black and tan soundproofing panels on top of black canvas, with single stark, contrasting lines of hot pink paint

nestled on the side. One exception to the series is a five-part painting entitled *Long, Low, Rest (semibreve)* (2011), which stretches a grey semibreve (or musical rest) across a white background, denoting silence, while the other wall pieces *act as* silence. This work employs the strategies of Jones’s older drawings such as *The Walkman Compositions* (2008–09), where she pulled out design elements used on the exterior casing of popular Walkman models, such as the Sanyo FM and the Sony WM-18, and drew them in isolation. The drawings, like the *Acoustic Paintings*, provoke a familiarity with an object or context (in the case of *Long, Low, Rest (semibreve)*, the sheet music) that is absent.

This same effect is at play in *From The Low*, which projects sound from above on suspended speakers, and from below via a thunderous subwoofer on the floor. The composition is an ominous dark rumble of low frequency samples appropriated from jazz and classical music, ranging from musicians and composers like Charles Mingus, JS Bach, Ray Brown,

Sergei Prokofiev and Arvo Pärt, frequently interspersed with silence. One might briefly recognise an upright bass solo or violin strings before they’re subsumed in the larger stretch of sound, or sudden pauses. In weaving these multiple sources together, Jones had to attune herself to their acoustic physicality. The distribution of the overhead speakers and subwoofer permit the viewer to not only hear but feel the sound. During one of the main movements within the piece, the subwoofer emits a barely audible, but intensely physical low rhythmic pulse, while pockets of bass feed in and out from above.

Jones’s previous sound works have been attentive to the voices of celebrated African-American singers, such as Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald and Nina Simone – separating their voices out from the musical accompaniment to give new voice to the voiceless. In *Absorb/Diffuse* this intention took on a new form, with ‘voice’ becoming an enveloping presence within the exhibition space.

Ceci Moss