Symposium Transforms Low into Cutting-Edge Art Exhibition

By Calvin Morris

The Rotunda of Low Library is well known for being a versatile space, frequently used for a wide variety of University events. Yet on Thursday, Sept. 30, anyone in the immediate vicinity of the building could plainly see that the evening’s proceedings were anything but routine. As a large crowd gathered, the steps of Low were host to a site-specific dance performance by Theresa Lang, BC'99, and Jonathan Lee, CC'98, GSAS'98.04.

Soft reverberations of an amplified mandolin then emanated down the steps of Low as a wind- ing line of eager ticket-holders shuffled into the building. What they couldn’t see from outside was Teeny Pender, assistant director of Columbia’s Computer Music Center (CMC), who plucked the melodies causing the fluctuations in a large network of sound-reactive mylar panels strung across Low’s domed ceiling. The result was a seemingly underwater atmosphere, which contrasted the technological art installations greeting the crowd at the door.

Overall, students, faculty, staff and the larger community had come specifically to experience something new and, before even getting fully underway, the event didn’t disappoint. Even Provost Alan Bzdiky admitted to being a bit taken aback by how dramatically Low had been transformed, while he introduced Columbia 250’s Closing Weekend Symposium, “RENEW: Frontiers in Creativity.” The event, which featured multimedia performances by some of the foremost figures in electronic performance as well as insightful commentary, was designed to ask the question, What is new in art and why does it matter?

Once the audience had occupied every seat in the house, co-organizer Elaine Sisman, Anne Patterson Professor of music and department chair, spoke about the idea of newness and how, as history marches on, it becomes harder to talk about.

“The edge against which the new is always moving,” said “Yesterday’s radical innovation becomes today’s comfortable cliché,” Sisman noted. “To avoid this cycle, the human propensity for change—evergreen classic,” Sisman said. “Yesterday’s radical innovation becomes today’s comfortable cliché.”

The performances opened with a metallic clang of Pika Pika, a robot-influenced interactive dance by Tomie Hahn and Columbia’s Curtis Bahn. Drawing upon traditional Nihon buyo and bunraku Japanese dance, Hahn infused the traditional forms with contemporary anime (Japanese animation) with machine-like sound effects generated by abrupt body movements.

Also utilizing visual effects on the screen were Sisman tapped into the University’s arsenal of world-renowned critics and thinkers with a panel consisting of Arthur C. Danto, Johnsonian Professor of Philosophy at Columbia, Richard Negri, professor of psychology; and Simon Gumm/Harry and Albert Von Tilzer Professor of Music, Jesús Goicco, professor of music and director of the screen were Maja Cerar, professor of music and director of the contemporary Nihon buyo and bunraku Japanese dance, Hahn infused the traditional forms with contemporary anime (Japanese animation) with machine-like sound effects triggered by abrupt body movements. As Hahn glanced about the room, her image, distorted with visual effects, was projected on a large screen.

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