

Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary

Ecstasy and Abstraction. Dan Graham's Description of Counter Culture in *Rock My Religion und Don't Trust Anyone Over Thirty*.

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It is interesting that one of the most important texts on the theory of rock music is neither a text nor is it by a theorist of rock music or the counter culture. Rather, it is by a visual artist. First of all, Dan Graham's *Rock My Religion* is a video, from which a transcription was made. The title, however, has also been used for the edition of his collected writings from 1965 – 1990 that includes this transcript. Secondly, it is the first systematic work concerning the connection between sexuality and capitalism as the basis of a cultural complex with many different, but nevertheless specific forms of appearance. Graham focuses on two symptoms of the American version of the complex. On one hand, there is the prehistory of a specific combination of socialist-utopian, ecstatic, and precisely regulated social formations that the protestant and other heretical sects have brought to America from England since the seventeenth century and that they then tested and developed. On the other, there is the aftermath of this development: rock and roll.

In reduced and simplified terms, Graham's thesis would be that this connection is the forgotten link to the counter culture that is based on pop music. When he formulated this thesis in the early 1980s, it was new and consequential. This was also the time when it looked like rock and roll could once again rejuvenate and reinvent itself as a messianic, transgressive culture by way of punk and New Wave. In New York, the so-called No Wave culture that combined experimental rock music (James Chance, Teenage Jesus & The Jerks, Mars, DNA, later, Sonic Youth) with a Super-8 Film avant-garde (Scott & Beth B, Eric Mitchell, Lydia Lunch, James Nares, Vivienne Dick and later Nick Zedd, Richard Kern etc.) were actually successful at remaining in the realm of high art. In retrospect, one can, to a certain extent, identify artists like John Zorn, Jim Jarmusch, or Glenn Branca as products of this scene. During the No Wave movement, Graham was, at times, directly involved in the production of records by The Static and the Theoretical Girls. The return of an explosive mixture of elements from messianic religion and nihilistic aggression in the music of the early 1980s appeared to verify Graham's theory that he developed when considering people from the 1960s and 1970s, like Jim Morrison and Patti Smith.

These days, the diverse phenomena that have helped to shape rock and roll culture—especially its revolutionary Messianism—have taken on every day appearances in the society of the spectacle. For that reason, they have had to have been ripped out of their original context. Graham's video essay has become so pertinent because he has worked out the elements that—often unconsciously—make the important connections in rock culture. He exposed the subcutaneous traces of a genealogy, which at first seem to be comprised only of the particularly crude and clear appearances that do not make any foundational connections. Graham's theory of performativity, however, clearly exposes the latent element that determines the entirety of classic rock culture, namely, the stabilizing aspect of the performative act that creates community. Graham shows precisely how the celebrated sexuality of the individual, of the star, creates the sense of community. But the community is one that is produced in a quasi-religious manner by independently motivated individuals who have experienced transgressions vis-à-vis a hyper-individual performer, instead of priests or sacrificial animals.

While the culture of rock has been read as a counterculture that has distinguished itself primarily through its rejection of institutions and organized its own institutions in opposition to and negatively towards them, Graham has shown that they have developed their own strategy for developing communities. Those strategies did not simply fall from the sky; rather, they came from a specific Anglo-American heretical culture. Graham has exposed a secret channel that

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connects different points, which would be invisible from the perspective of a typical historian. This would be something like an unconscious America that had repeatedly tried to re-invent community and sexuality in rituals. They would not only frequently have communist tendencies; but also, they would have feminist features, as Graham shows with the tradition that extends from the Shakers to Patti Smith. Consequently, the features of contemporary countercultures, such as alternative economic ideas, alternative sexuality, and alternative gender roles, that are all held together by the rituals of rock and roll, would not merely be an addition of a set of different contemporary ideas, so much as something that was historically and systematically bound together.

Today, these elements are no longer held together by genealogical stories, instead they appear isolated from each other. *Don't Trust Anyone Over Thirty* concerns the ridiculousness of isolation as well as the surprising comedy of reconstructed connections. It also establishes a continuity with *Rock My Religion* with their shared interest in the history of countercultures. Disconnecting the youth culture from the historical moments in which they rebel or even only try to actively distinguish themselves only produces a false abstraction. However, it is typical for the culture industry to operate with such abstractions as trademarks of products being launched. Youth culture always stand in close proximity to the market, so even in its critical and autonomous incarnations, it is commonly influenced by these abstractions.

The category of youth is not only a false abstraction, but it is generated out of the farcical film from the 1960s, *Wild in the Streets*, that serves as the basis for this puppet theater by providing a grotesque reading of rebellion and youth culture. The reason for exclusion that justifies a rebellion (i.e., youth does not belong to the society of adults) becomes the qualification for the exclusion (i.e., We, who are part of the culture of youth, exclude all who are not juveniles). This is a cycle of politics that are reduced to a formal element, namely the reason for exclusion. It is no longer the false abstraction of advertising or the instrumentalization of the culture industry, rather it is the false abstraction that regulates the public sphere, in which simple themes and so-called single issue politics determine public debates. Certainly, both issues are connected to each other: the public sphere conforms to the market and issues compete for attention.

What is particularly ingenious about the marionette play is its conceit that both false abstractions create a connection. On the one hand, there is the reduction of the counter culture to a single issue movement of youth and exclusively juveniles and children, and on the other, there is the idiotic idea that the counter culture of the 1960s allowed itself to be boiled down to real political suggestions about the voting age and other crippled forms of the public sphere. A counter culture that has been brought down to the level of a false public sphere and a false economy is still in a position to transgress its own cultural system. The youth are interested in political representation and the political representatives are challenged by the cultural actors. In light of the present situation and the complete segmentation and segregation of life worlds, it is curious and comical that even the most laughable, childish, and warped counter culture of the 1960s has an advantage over each contemporary counter culture, which only operates on a, for the most part, very small social area.

There is still another conceit, namely, the simultaneity of on one hand tenderly reconstructive and profoundly silly devices on the other hand. This results in the friendly negation of negation that opens the counter culture of trash to a remarkably misplaced empathy and engagement that is out of phase. It is the best that one can do for them. Contrary to precursors of such a culturally and theoretically reasoned, as well as childish, historical reconstruction, such as the records and the videos in the late 1980s by a band like Redd Kross, Graham and his combat-

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ants also create a connection to the present. The one pop star today who deserves this title and even fits in all too well into this tragicomedy is Andre 3000 Benjamin from Outkast. He is the exceptional model for one of the marionettes.

Translated from the German by Franz Peter Hugdahl.

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