

CUMULUS

From America

IN EVERY EDITION OF PARKETT, TWO CUMULUS CLOUDS, ONE FROM AMERICA, THE OTHER FROM EUROPE, FLOAT OUT TO AN INTERESTED PUBLIC. THEY CONVEY INDIVIDUAL OPINIONS, ASSESSMENTS, AND MEMORABLE ENCOUNTERS - AS ENTIRELY PERSONAL PRESENTATIONS OF PROFESSIONAL ISSUES.

Our contributors to this issue are ELEONORA LOUIS and CHRISTOPH GEISSMAR from Vienna, and HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA from Los Angeles. Eleonora Louis took a look at the exhibition, *The Rhetoric of the Body*; she spoke to Christoph Geissmar, who curated the exhibition at the Albertina Museum with Ilsebill Barta Fliedl. Hunter Drohojowska is a professor at the Otis/Parsons School of Art and Design. She is currently writing a book about Georgia O'Keeffe.

Artists in Pursuit of the Teen Spirit

The scene was strange. There were two drummers on stage, pounding away on their kits, but no band. The drum tracks of The Who's "Happy Jack" thundered through the auditorium, abstracted from the song and played one beat apart to simulate phasing. Hendrix's instantly recognizable "Manic Depression" was added to the pulsating mess, along with Led Zeppelin's "When the Levee Breaks" and Blue

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Cheer's "Just A Little Bit." Two dancers, blond Amazon Anita Pace and effeminate black Carl Burkley, made slicing arm movements and sharp staccato steps choreographed to the drum sections. The decibel levels mounted, crashing and snapping all around, then the drumming ceased and actor Alan Abelew gave vaudevillian monologues

on the lives of excess led by deceased rock star percussionists Keith Moon and John Bonham, as well as Mitch Mitchell of The Jimmy Hendrix Experience and Paul Whaley of Blue Cheer.

During the entr'actes, Stephen Prina came on stage wearing a green sequined vest and black tuxedo. He looked like Cole Porter, but he was playing a Gibson Firebird and reciting the words to the week's number one

single from Billboard's Hot 100 Singles Chart: "Baby Got Back," a paean to big-bottomed women by rap master Sir Mixalot. It was not only a hilarious counterpoint to the cacophony of the drum acts, it enabled the mostly white art world audience to finally understand the lyrics of a hit rap song.

The Beat of the Traps, as this performance was called, was written and directed by Mike Kelley in collaboration with Prina and Pace and held last June in the Gindi Auditorium of the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, after a successful debut at the Vienna Festival.

Kelley, whose own performances have been crucial to his art, is confrontational. His art is meant to slam the pretensions to sublimity of much modernist art theory. In this performance, he applied those methods of deconstruction to an art that is less familiar with the rituals of self-criticality: rock 'n'roll.

He staged a rock concert without the lead singer, the pelvic thrust, the sexual propulsion, or the claim on transcendence that are part of rock's divine pantheon of addiction, libido, and perpetual adolescence. Godhead was dissected.

Prina, too, has dedicated much of his work to confronting assumptions about "beauty" and "sublimity" through the presentational models of fine art. He lets the cultural apparatus, via the Billboard charts, select the song he narrates. Each performance will incorporate a different hit song because the charts are everchanging.

Kelley's drums without words, Prina's words without drums, even in a state of deconstruction, the beat goes on. In Los Angeles, this is the latest evidence of an integration of art and rock, high cul-

ture invigorating itself with the rambunctious spirit of low life and questioning the nature of such categories.

In Los Angeles, as elsewhere, visual artists are coming out on vinyl, cassette, and CD, referring to rock in their performances and their art. Kelley's involvement goes back to his Detroit roots, where the MC 5 must have seemed more relevant than Abstract Expressionism. He plays and sings on



RAYMOND PETTIBON,
NO TITLE, 1990,
ink on paper, 12 3/4 x 13" each /
je 32,4 x 33 cm.

rock records produced by artists like fellow Detroit refugee Jim Shaw, or Raymond Pettibon, who came to Kelley's attention for his brilliant line

drawing covers for the albums of Black Flag. (Former Black Flag guitarist and SST owner Greg Ginn is Pettibon's brother.)

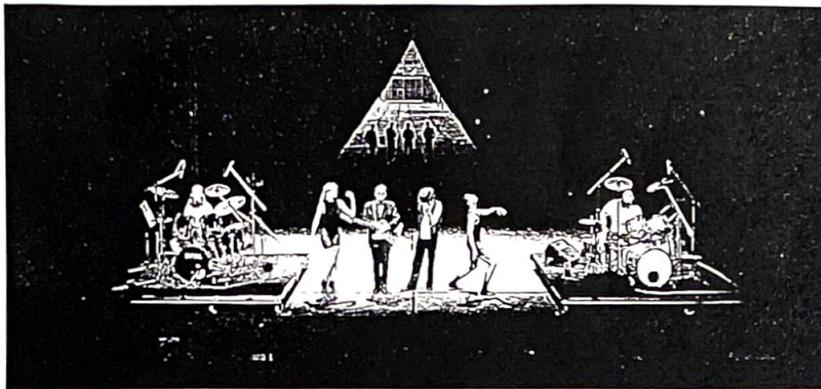
What might have been the source of this retreat to raunch? Shaw, Kelley, and Prina all graduated from the California Institute of the Arts in the late '70s, where the idea of art as raw self-expression was thoroughly discouraged. Rock, less confined by critical theory, provides models of regression, channels for rage, lust, and power not readily available to the academically trained artist.

Kelley says, "I was trained by Abstract Expressionist painters. (Playing music) is a way to work in that method without being visual. Art, for me, became a responsibility. Music can remain mindless dabbling—which is okay."

Tom Henry III, lead singer of a band of Cal Arts students called Spin-out, puts it succinctly, recalling his musical beginnings while enrolled in the intensely theoretical curriculum: "I hated the whole system there, but one of the things I learned was how to rock. It was the best class I had and I was the teacher and the pupil."

Richie Lee, the bass player in Spin-out, plays and sings on Pettibon's and Shaw's records. Lee says, "My first aesthetic understanding of anything was rock'n'roll. It's the reason I went to school." Both Lee and Henry make paintings that allude to rock subculture.

Certainly, rock is the first "art" that most teenagers find speaking to their issues. Also, artists have appropriated the images and objects of power in commercial photography and mass culture. Now they impinge on the territory of rock'n'roll. Sampling is the rock equivalent of appropriation. Bound-



aries everywhere have collapsed. Artists can embrace the vocabulary of rock to address issues of faith, transcendence, success, failure, alienation, and celebrity.

Shaw issued a 45 rpm record to accompany his 1991 exhibition *My Mirage*, a coming of age tale which concerns adolescent Billy and his '60s style cycle of addiction to drugs, sex, and religion. His fictional group, The Dogz, is led by a Charles Manson-like character.

"I wanted to work in variations on '60s aesthetics," says Shaw. "On the one hand, rock music reflects the angst that kids feel and, on the other, it gives temporary answers in their language." "Willy Nilly" features a rearrangement of a song that was sung by Manson devotees, The Family, and sung by artists Liz Lerner, Cindy Bernard, Martine Tomczyk, Laura Graham, and Maja Beeton. The flip side, "It's Easter in My Brain," is a pseudo-psychedelic composition. Shaw includes Prina on keyboards, Kelley on guitar, and half a dozen other L.A. artists on instruments or as background singers.

"My job, that of a two-dimensional artist working mostly on walls, just isn't that moving," explains Shaw. "I try to

work emotions into it through the narrative but there are some limitations in the art world. The art world doesn't want to get too obvious or specific about anything. It wants to maintain an approach of abstraction that allows them an out from utter sincerity."

In the late '70s, young artists often found their interests overlapping with those of the punk scene. Performance art had evolved in a theatrical direction that led many to make records. Laurie Anderson began her now trademark violin on the streets; in L.A. Carole Carampas and Marnie Weber have made records that correspond to their exhibitions of paintings and collages. Actress Ann Magnuson has maintained a parallel career as lead singer and writer for the rock band Bongwater. Having recently released her fifth album, *The Big Sell-Out*, Magnuson points out: "Everyone wants to be a rock star, right? It's probably because we grew up with it and love it. It's immediately gratifying. It's hard to articulate the pleasure you get from music."

This crossover of rock music, performance art, and visual art has attracted its own cult audience and the atten-

tion of an independent record company based in London and New York. Blast First commissioned a series of picture discs by visual and performance artists which melds graphic imagery—amazing last gasp examples of the visual virtues of vinyl—with the artists' choice of music. For example, Robert Williams's *Chyme, Smoke & Fire* is a compilation of hot rod music on a record lavishly decorated with big bumpered cars and blondes.

Reyne Cuccuro of Blast First explains that the disciplines of art, music, and performance "all grew up together organically in the late '80s because the artists respected each other's work. There is no reason an independent record label can't produce something that recognizes these interrelationships. We're making the logical interface between records, performance, and art."

Touches and Standards: Raymond Pettibon with Super Session is an ironically titled picture disc with the artist's disarmingly awkward drawings on one side of the record, an image of powder blue clouds with red words on the other. This album includes a book of the artist's drawings, all in the circular format of the record.

Pettibon says he wrote the lyrics of his album and "delegated the music" to some friends, including Kelley and Lee. The results recall the spontaneity of earliest rock recording. Uncomplicated in structure or melody, the songs are often parodies of rock genres such as the surfer song "Pablo Casals (A-daddy-O-for-Strings)."

"Most of the songs on this record are parodying styles or rock because I wanted to do my own version of songs," says Pettibon. "At least, I'm bringing something to it outside of what you'd

get in rock music. It invigorates the form." But the relationship between rock and art begins earlier, in the '60s at least, when performance art was in its infancy. Terry Allen, who has worked in performance and installation art as well as other media, says, "I always did music and I always did drawing or painting. They are similar working processes. The '60s had something to do with it. From 1962 to 1966, (I) played in a band. Music was what was happening then that proved to be the most volatile form of expression."

Allen comes from Lubbock, Texas—home of Buddy Holly—and re-

leased four albums of his own country western rock songs played by his Panhandle Mystery Band. He confesses, "I don't consider myself a performer. But if you write songs and no one else is playing them, that's your only option. It's like hanging the art on the walls."

Allen dedicated his song "Amarillo Highway" to art critic/songwriter Dave Hickey. Last year, Hickey produced "Oscar and Billy", a speculative ballad on the lives of Oscar Wilde and Billy the Kid. At present, he is simultaneously writing a novel about a rock'n'roll band and producing an album of songs by the fictional group.

Hickey has unique perspective on the reasons visual artists might get involved in rock'n'roll: "It's kind of comforting to know you can communicate on some sort of community level with another person. I have no problem distinguishing myself from my peers but finding common ground can be important and pop music is about that. It may only be establishing common ground with other dope-shooting, violent, bike-riding assholes but that's better than total alienation. If you're interested in total alienation, you make a work of art."

Künstler auf der Jagd nach dem Geist der Jugend

Es bot sich ein merkwürdiges Schauspiel: Da waren zwei Schlagzeuger auf der Bühne, die auf ihren Instrumenten herumhämmerten, aber keine Band. Der Schlagzeugsound des Who-Songs «Happy Jack» dröhnte durch den Saal, losgelöst vom Lied selbst und taktverschoben gespielt, um den Eindruck von Synchronität zu erwecken. In das pulsierende Chaos mischte sich auch Hendrix' sofort erkennbares «Manic Depression», «When the Levee Breaks» von Led Zeppelin und «Just A Little Bit» von Blue Cheer. Zwei Tänzer, die

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blonde Amazone Anita Pace und der effemierte Schwarze Carl Burkley, bewegten sich dazu mit schneidenden Armbewegungen und brüskten, staccatoartigen Schritten, die auf den Schlagzeugsound abgestimmt waren. Die Dezibelwerte sausten donnernd und krachend in die Höhe, dann verstummte das Getöse plötzlich, und der Schauspieler Alan Abelew erschien. Er erging sich in variéartigen Monologen über das ausschweifende Leben

der verstorbenen Rockstar-Perkussionisten Keith Moon und John Bonham sowie über Mitch Mitchell von The Jimi Hendrix Experience und das Blue-Cheer-Mitglied Paul Whaley.

In den Pausen trat Stephen Prina auf die Bühne, bekleidet mit einer grünen, paillettenbesetzten Weste und einem schwarzen Smoking. Er sah aus wie Cole Porter, doch er spielte auf einer Gibson Firebird und rezitierte den Text der aktuellen Nummer 1 der Singles-Hitparade: «Baby Got Back», ein Lobgesang auf Frauen mit einem