

Art

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Eva Rothschild
Interviewed by Ian Hunt

Siobhán Hapaska
Interviewed by Hester R Westley

The Painting of Modern Life
JJ Charlesworth

Fair or Foul
Pryle Behrman



■ Sympathy for the Devil: Art and Rock and Roll Since 1967

Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago

September 29 to January 6

These past few months, using dissimilar approaches, three art and rock music museum shows will have opened in different countries. As anyone looking for critical texts in gallery bookshops will have noticed, a realignment of priorities is under way: a surge of popular music writing is taking over shelf space from theory. Thirty years on we seem in the midst of an institutional gob-fest, as museum trustees, directors, curators and artists, embracing their common punk ancestry, now bury in cash and scholarship what they once lathered in spittle. Closing in September was Mark Sladen and Ariella Yedgar's Barbican Art Gallery show 'Panic Attack! Art in the Punk Years', a disciplined reappraisal of the relations between 70s conceptualism and punk rock whose estrangement had largely been taken for granted. Starting in September, 'Sympathy for the Devil: Art and Rock and Roll Since 1967', put together by Dominic Molon at Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), shares a number of the same exhibitors in a survey of artists' projects engaged with music. And from mid October, ARC/Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris will screen 50 artist-made music videos in 'Playback'.

In these three shows, where music industry paraphernalia is excluded, curators' choices can fall morphologically, by only



Christian Marclay
Untitled 2007

tolerating work that references music (MCA and ARC), or contextually, where issues or processes shared by musicians and artists become the exhibition's theme regardless of whether or not they concern music (Barbican). Whereas this second option can apply its determining concepts to the most unlikely artefacts, the first approach has to develop a strong thesis to provide anything more than an idiosyncratic inventory. This is lacking at MCA.

Kicking off a post-psychedelic disenchantment (represented here by Richard Hamilton's lithograph *Swinging London 67*, 1967-68, and Andy Warhol's screen tests of The Velvet Underground, 1966), the chronological opening of 'Sympathy for the Devil' shifts awkwardly to geographical categories. The show's most generously represented localities of New York, Los Angeles and the Midwest make the comparatively meagre selections for 'The UK', 'Europe' and 'The World' seem lesser veins off the mother lode. This is most egregious where those foreign artists like assume vivid astro focus, Jutta Koether and Rikrit Tiravanija turn out to be living in the US. With such disparate content even among the large-scale crowd-pleasing examples, like Christian Marclay, Jim Lambie, or Destroy All Monsters Collective, the lack of a driving idea leaves individual works advancing no common argument. Had Molon focused less on securing high-impact superstar installations, his polemically valuable roster of relatively obscure artists who de-differentiate categories of art, performance and music, might have expanded to include the likes of Spencer Yeh, Leafcutter John, Jem Finer or Beijing's Glorious Pharmacy.

Despite a declared bias towards punk, Molon's inconsistently applied prohibition on commercial images excludes designs by Jamie Reid, Crass, Wire or innumerable other graphic innovators. Yet various Raymond Pettibon drawings from 1979-82 are here in lieu of the Black Flag records they illustrated; Peter Saville's designs for New Order's *Power, Corruption and Lies* album sit alongside examples of the actual cover; and projected elsewhere is the very commercial 2006 video by Charlie White for Interpol's 'Evil'. With two montages from 1977, Linder is the only one of her punk generation represented, although her cover for the Buzzcocks' *Orgasm Addict*, absent from the show, is the more remarkable cultural incursion. Molon's efforts to find work-arounds for his veto on commercial products reach their apogee with Jay Heikes's static camera video *Daydream Nation*, 2000, replicating Gerhard Richter's painted image of a burning candle before a green background, used for an album cover by Sonic Youth. It is a nice conceit, but like so much else in the show it smoothes the edges and cleans the grunginess of the world it so blithely colonises.

How can museums avoid smothering rock and roll's adrenaline-charged and unruly character with institutional conventions? There is a chasm between the sterile MCA ambience and the rebellious mayhem characterising some of the works' subject matter, a condition exacerbated by the obsessive tidiness of display-case arrangements of Saville and Throbbing Gristle ephemera. Besides Throbbing Gristle (by now an overly familiar curator's standby for radicality), there is very little in the exhibition that uses rock performance to posit new ways for thinking of art, let alone questioning its basis. Given rock and roll's disaffirmative history, it is surprising that virtually every work in the show accommodates music to affirm an exalted status for art, here seen absorbing rock and roll as effortlessly as

Jim Lambie *The Byrds (Love in a Void)* 2007 standing on *Pinball Wizard* 2007



it has any other popular manifestation. Rather improbably, the few examples of aesthetic instability draw on dance culture, whose antithetical relation to rock and roll raises the question of why such work is in the show at all. Mark Lecky's video *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore*, 1999, charting British dance scenes from Northern Soul through Trance, is the more mesmerising for disengaging an intermittently deteriorating soundtrack from its image. This structural lacuna trades reassuring mnemonic or emotional connection for the uncanniness of manic dancers, eyes ablaze, delirious and solitary at the heart of the crowd.

Though ridiculously sexist and funk-based, Pedro Bell's 1981 large-scale coloured marker drawings for Funkadelic's *Electric Spanking of War Babies* at least restore to the show the libido that permeates rock and roll. If it weren't for Bell's obsessions you might come away feeling that these artists are uninterested in or incapable of getting laid. The inclusion of Douglas Gordon's best work, the three large-scale silent video projections from 1995-96, *Bootleg (Cramped)*, *Bootleg (Big-mouth)* and *Bootleg (Stoned)*, is an exception in its celebration of performers' sexuality, where across the room from the projected image of a Rolling Stones concert audience, The Smiths' Morrissey campily preens as gladioli cascade around him, while The Cramps' Lux Interior is lost in feigned fellatio with the mic, both singers shirtless and seen in grainy decelerated footage.

A separate video selection including Daniel Guzmán's attitude-rich *New York Groove*, 2004, in which regular Latino guys parodically sashay along a busy sidewalk, Phyllis Baldino's raucous *19 Universes/my brother*, also 2004, and Robert Longo's 1986 Megadeth video *Peace Sells* restore some direct energy to the show. There is also rare footage of Art & Language's theory-driven jam with Mayo Thompson and Red Krayola in *Nine Gross and Conspicuous Errors*, 1976, one of

their many interactions with contemporary musicians that are outlined in the catalogue.

Molon's thorough catalogue texts establish his reference points with frequent digressions on the popular music and iconography whose omission from the show further isolates the art. The key essays here though are Simon Reynolds's 'Ono, Eno, Arto: Nonmusicians and the Emergence of Concept Rock' and Richard Hell's 'CBGB as a Physical Space', which set out paths of research this show might wisely have followed, establishing structural correspondences between significant new music and visual art experimentation, not surprisingly along contextual, non-morphological lines. The sonic innovations of punk rock find their British equivalent in visual art 25 years later in structurally resourceful and irreverent work by Sarah Lucas, Martin Creed and BANK among others. But that kind of proposition belongs to a very different show. Here, by contrast, MCA's well-behaved artists push back at sex, drugs and rock and roll with abstinence and responsibility. Molon may not have suffered from such inappropriate responsibility himself had he not been working at an institution whose historically significant engagement with new art accretes into an orthodoxy inhibiting truly radical ventures. Perhaps Molon's witty closing explanation of his show – 'approaching both cultural realms with courtesy, sympathy, and taste' – references the Rolling Stones as a genuine apology for this triumph of elegance over nerve. ■

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2007 detail

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