

# **Deaf Dumb Mute Blind: Artistic Approaches to Image/Sound Relationships in Pop Culture**

Christian Höller

One feature that has historically characterized pop and rock music is the radical strain that they place on the capacity of specific sense faculties. Pop and rock are based on sounds that are so loud, so piercing, so noisy, or so intractably repetitive that the uninitiated would be happier not to hear them at all. This kind of music depends on mediating circuits (amplifiers, distortion modules, samplers, and so forth) that enlarge the resonance space of the original acoustic product—whether it has been created by a human being or an instrument. Pop and rock music are thus *media art* in the best sense of the term, if this term is understood as the expansion (however achieved) of a *natural* product, as it were, into an open space of propagation, overwhelming presence, or even telepresence. In other words, they transport an excess that, as regards the effect on the senses, might be characterized as a defining feature of the culture associated with this music.

“If it’s too loud for you, move back!” Lou Reed once said at a performance of the Exploding Plastic Inevitable, of which The Velvet Underground’s music on overdrive was an important component.<sup>1</sup> Reed was not particularly concerned that the extreme sound might disturb spectators or cause them to shrink back from the performers. At the same time, the multimedia spectacle—which won the Velvets (at least local) fame—consisted of a range of other constituent parts: film and slide projections, strobe lights, dance interludes, and more. It was as though this music that so overtaxed the ear was to be given additional vigor or was to be channeled by other means (e.g., film, light, movement) toward other sensory faculties. Or, put another way, as though the aim was to address, or indeed bombard, as many senses as possible at the same time so as to truly accentuate the transgressive power of the music. According to contemporaries, the aim of Exploding Plastic Inevitable was a “total assault on the senses,” “the last stand of the ego, before it either breaks down or goes to the other side.”<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the disdainful “Move back!” with which musicians such as Reed insisted on the vehemence of their sound, numerous supplementary or evasive maneuvers also have been used in an attempt to subdue the sensory overloads inherent in pop culture. An example is the valorization of the persona of the star who—whether or not he or she actually produced the music—lent the acoustic performance a face, a body, and, consequently, another extravagant projection surface. The same aim was achieved by means of a variety of visual formats: the advent of promo clips (as they were originally called) and music videos (the more recent term) initiated the gradual prevalence of visual

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<sup>1</sup> The performance took place on November 4, 1966, at the Grand Valley Dale Ballroom in Columbus, Ohio. It is featured along with other material on the bootleg CD *If It's Too Loud for You, Move Back!* (Japan, 1997). The full lead-in from Reed was as follows: “If it’s too loud for you, move back! Another thing . . . you have a big space here, and you don’t have to stay seated. You know you can do things on the floor.” Cf. Branden W. Joseph, “My Mind Split Open: Andy Warhol’s Exploding Plastic Inevitable,” *Grey Room* 8 (Summer 2002), 80–107.

<sup>2</sup> Abbie Hoffman and Jonas Mekas, respectively. Cited in David Joselit, “Yippie Pop: Abbie Hoffman, Andy Warhol, and Sixties Media Politics,” *Grey Room* 8 (Summer 2002), 72.

elements in pop culture.<sup>3</sup> And let us not forget that, going back far in time, diverse forms of visual art employing a variety of media have repeatedly latched onto the acoustic productions of different decades. The purpose was not so much to master the peculiarities of sound media in another format or to impose some kind of a visual corset on them, as to elaborate and further the phenomena of transmission, distortion, and expansion found in the original musical medium. In all of these extensions of the initial, once central medium (i.e., music), a peculiar channeling, if not to say taming, of the sensory overloads mentioned above took place. If the music was too loud, perhaps it would be easier to consume in the form of images. And if an image was too dominant, this could perhaps be counteracted by a radicalization at the level of sound. Or if sound and image were even to become entangled in mutual efforts to outdo one another,<sup>4</sup> then one could always close one's eyes and ears and open oneself to the possibility of a moment of silence. This road frequently has been followed in the history of pop culture, at least in the form of calmer, more reserved, or less spectacular orchestrations coming to the fore in the place of more brash approaches.

## Pop Art

Efforts to capture the economy of the senses in rock and pop and to focus research on the image/sound relationships ingrained in these two genres have developed over the years into the field of pop art.<sup>5</sup> This is a kind of art that situates itself beyond the apparent contradiction between visual art as it is traditionally understood and media art, which employs modern information and communication technologies. In fact, pop art thwarts this distinction by attending to the above-mentioned phenomena of excess as its very own objects, whether with the help of traditional or more contemporary media. And in its formal methods it pursues aspects of distortion, expansion, and excess, without forcing them into an *a priori* media-based scheme. In pop art, the modes of approach differ significantly depending on which specific facet of the image/sound relationship is explored. Whereas some pop artists concentrate on the repertoire of images conveyed by a particular musical style, others deal with the kind of musical resonance space that is borne—figuratively speaking—by certain types of images (e.g., the psychedelic-minimalist experiments of the 1960s, such as Ira Cohen's film *The Invasion of Thunderbolt Pagoda* [1968] and *Dream House* [since 1962] by La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela). Whereas some examine the production aspects of rock and pop music, such as the recording studio setting, others are more interested in reception behavior or the peculiarities of fandom (e.g., the artistic thematization of historical fan cultures and subcultures as portrayed in Matt Stokes's *Long after Tonight* [2005] and in Hans Weigand's *Disco Boys* [1977]).

<sup>3</sup> On the economic relationship between images and sound in pop culture and its transformation over time, see Lawrence Grossberg, "The Media Economy of Rock Culture: Cinema, Post-Modernity and Authenticity," in *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader*, eds. Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin, and Lawrence Grossberg (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 185–209.

<sup>4</sup> I have made this same argument in "The Music Image: How the Sounds of Pop and Counter-culture Became a Visually Defining Factor," in *See This Sound: Promises in Sound and Vision*, eds. Cosima Rainer, Stella Rollig, and Dieter Daniels (Cologne: Walther König, 2009), 200–205.

<sup>5</sup> Examples from the long tradition of pop art exhibitions are *It's Only Rock and Roll: Rock and Roll Currents in Contemporary Art*, which toured through twelve U.S. cities from 1995 onward; *Sympathy for the Devil: Art and Rock and Roll since 1967* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Fall 2007); and, most recently, "Schere—Stein—Papier: Pop-Musik als Gegenstand Bildender Kunst" (Kunsthau Graz, Summer 2009). On the term "pop art," see my article "Air-Guitar Playback: The Functions of 'Pop Art' Authorship," in *Schere—Stein—Papier: Pop-Musik als Gegenstand Bildender Kunst / Rock—Paper—Scissors: Pop Music as Subject of Visual Art*, eds. Peter Pakesch and Diedrich Diederichsen (Cologne: Walther König, 2009), 50–58.

Finally, another axis of pop art might be applied as a kind of sensory scale with a view to determining the principal sensory capacity (or incapacity) targeted by the refashioned rock and pop source material. In other words, how is the image/sound relationship underlying a particular historical pop phenomenon itself transformed into a new sensory configuration? An example of this approach is the film *Beatles Electroniques* (1969) by Nam June Paik and Jud Yalkut, in which a multitude of disturbing effects are applied to television recordings of the Beatles, revealing a kind of electronic background noise behind the media hysteria surrounding the band. Here, Paik and Yalkut not only amuse themselves with the technical alienation of solid pop fare, but also remind the viewer of the sensory revolution—the transcendence of all perceptual capacity—existing at the heart of entertainment culture. At least as far as the era of upheaval of the 1960s is concerned, new recording, storage, and transmission technologies revealed a technical and media-based *surplus* that first had to learn how to correctly contextualize and appraise the sensory faculty it was acting on—or indeed to abandon itself joyfully, openly, and unconditionally to it, as *Beatles Electroniques* seems to suggest.

It may seem reactionary to state that excessive consumption of rock and pop music makes us deaf, dumb, stupid, or otherwise dull. However, understood at an entirely different level, just this view represents a point of departure or, perhaps better, a *pole of reversal* for pop art. Depending on whether the approach in question addresses the auditory or the optical sense, the faculty of speech, or the intellect in general, it emphasizes a particular constellation of the image/sound relationship and explores its outer limits. This approach usually goes hand in hand with the sharpening of a particular sensory realm through an emphasis at the material level on specific media components. A few scenarios that exemplify such *sensory readjustments* will be explored in the following. I shall discuss examples of approaches in which the sensory overloads or sensory deficits mentioned above undergo a further, even transformative elaboration.

## Deaf

Pop art has repeatedly thematized a particular component of rock music that has characterized it since its inception: the moment of boundary transgression. Artists such as Paul McCarthy, Mike Kelley, Raymond Pettibon, Jim Shaw, Tony Oursler, and Doug Aitken, to mention but a few, have used a variety of means to explore the potential of rock and pop to violate boundaries. Mostly these artists have been concerned with visually representing—and in a sense compensating for—those aspects of abandon that could not be further broken down acoustically. This approach might be described succinctly as the endeavor to use other sensory means—be they graphic, filmic, or installational—to capture the affective excess of music that otherwise defies representation. This impetus occasionally goes so far as to entirely change medium, as in the *Gehörlose Musik* project (Deaf Music, 1988) by Die Tödliche Doris, in which the Berlin-based band's cumbersome post-punk music was performed in sign language. However, apart from such expansions of the context's boundaries, this approach mostly has remained faithful to the occasions of transgression transported by rock sounds.

Mike Kelley's current installation, *Sex, Drugs, and Rock and Roll Party Palace* (2009), is dedicated entirely to rock and roll's implicit promise of sex and virtually oversatisfies the visual curiosity of the visitors.<sup>6</sup> Nothing is subliminal or

<sup>6</sup> This installation could be seen in the exhibition *Schere—Stein—Papier: Pop-Musik als Gegenstand Bildender Kunst*, Kunsthaus Graz, June 6 to August 30, 2009.

implicit here; everything becomes a surface or opportunity for projection. The spectrum of porn clips projected onto an inflatable castle embraces a multitude of cinematic genres (ranging from period to psychedelic films), stressing that what matters most here is broad-based visual appeal. The psychedelic clips, in particular, evidence a moment of fusion that is rarely explored or shown in this way, in that the typical pornographic entanglement of the bodies is reinforced by optical effects such as double exposures, cross-fades, and prismatic shots. The period porn excerpts also reveal a visual moment of transgression when the paradoxical use of masks, which usually suits the flat corporeity of pornography, is exposed by strangely misplaced props and disguises. The same applies to the Western, historical, and other set pieces, which, especially because they represent unembellished borrowings from other genres, lend the pornographic sequences an extremely overdetermined quality.

One might expect the rock-and-roll aspect of the installation to be quite different. However, while it is true that it represents the main component (indeed it gives its name to the work), the actual musical features seem strangely misplaced within the overall arrangement. On the one hand, some of the rooms emit sounds, but in no sense is there a focus on an intrinsic musical value, for even in the areas targeted by a particular acoustic function, the incursion of the surrounding partial recordings results only in a cacophony. On the other hand—and here Kelley indulges in one of the “minor histories” he likes to practice—an encyclopedic archive of U.S. soundtrack composers unfolds before the viewer’s eyes.<sup>7</sup> The clanging acoustic chaos is counteracted by an archival order at the textual level. The acoustic dimension oscillates between a functional beat, an unrelenting thundering, and an inextricable tangle of multifarious sound sources, with the result that the installation implicitly demonstrates the extent to which the viewer’s actual sense for the musical dimension of pop culture has been lost, and how deeply a sound quality that once represented libertarianism has been buried under optical allure and visibility. This sensibility is recovered at another level—the level of the text or of knowledge—through the simultaneous display of an encyclopedia of the musical history of otherwise anonymous soundtrack productions (as well as encyclopedic knowledge concerning the sound dimension of the pornographic clips being screened).

The *Party Palace* thus focuses on the economy of the senses specific to rock and pop culture as it figured—always furnishing new resources—in the entertainment industry complex from the 1960s onward. Because the visitors are not allowed to touch the exhibits or enter the inflatable castles, the installation demonstrates the extent to which what was once the “omnisensorium” of rock culture, the “assault on all senses,” has been confined to an overriding audiovisual dimension. Moreover, the simultaneous sounding of numerous acoustic sources paradoxically diminishes the sense of hearing. It is as though the recipients of sound were gradually *deafened* by their exposure to excessive sound on all channels and through today’s administration of Muzak even in the tiniest pockets of everyday life. It is as though the sense for the acoustic (and the musical) must first be restored by shifting the focus to a different kind of overstrained sensuality that outdoes all else. *Ex negativo*, bombarding us with a pornographic cacophony will restore to us a grain of critical sensitivity with respect to historical moments of liberation.

Kelley once wrote that only in the context of 1960s counterculture could such transgressive practices as gender-crossing and glorification of the esoteric and the sinister, found among many rock bands of the era, develop and take root in

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<sup>7</sup> See Mike Kelley, *Minor Histories: Statements, Conversations, Proposals*, ed. John C. Welchman (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004).

popular culture.<sup>8</sup> If the cultural revolution, which brought together the most diverse elements, was once a sort of engine driving forward a new sensorium and new sensory desires and capacities, this momentum has almost been reversed in recent decades. The overstimulation of the senses in which entertainment culture has vigorously engaged for a long time now makes all previous moments of upheaval or discontinuity seem almost puny by comparison. *Sex, Drugs, and Rock and Roll Party Palace* erects an airy and at the same time densely packed memorial to this impetus. And it does so by transforming boundary transgression into oversized visual appeal.

## Dumb

An example of an entirely different approach to dealing with both sensory overloads and sensory deficits is the *Karaoke Bar* created in 2005 by Art & Language together with The Red Krayola.<sup>9</sup> This installation also focuses on rock music's historical radical potential (or loss of it), and it, too, translates its manifestations into a contemporary form of everyday entertainment architecture. However, the position of the viewers is quite different than that in Kelley's work, for they are incorporated into the image/sound configuration in an entirely different manner. Not in the sense that an attempt is made to *compensate* visually or by means of an installation for what is otherwise not representable in terms of musical possibilities of boundary transgression; instead, the musical source material is in a sense *overcoded* with both artificial installational and everyday cultural means. Thus, the endeavor is not to compensate the excess of *one* medium (e.g., sound) by *another* (e.g., visual excess); rather, the *compensation*, if this is the correct term, takes place at the multisensorial and, ultimately, intellectual level.

The essence of this overcoding is significant breaks inserted into almost all aspects of the karaoke arrangement.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the scrolling texts (and the accompanying music) are not just average pop fare, but rather consist of excerpts from the albums that Art & Language and The Red Krayola recorded together between 1976 and 1983. At that time, the two bands were experimenting with applying a pop-song format to extracts from Marxist theory, seditious pamphlets, slogans reshaped as poetry, historical aperçus, and the like, and they were giving generous musical scope to the resulting mutual breaks. Even thirty years later, this blending of forms made up of catchy refrains, unconventional recitatives, and Marxist diction ("And we will be fed / Breakfast in bed / And served by a fat millionaire"<sup>11</sup>) has lost none of its incisiveness. The breaks created by the old periodicals displayed in the installation (*The Fox* and *Art-Language*) and the posters taken from them and hung on the walls are also consistent with the format. This mix creates an atmosphere that, while formally corresponding to the setting of a singing booth, is actually diametrically opposed to it thematically.

<sup>8</sup> Mike Kelley, "Cross Gender/Cross Genre," in *Foul Perfection: Essays and Criticism*, ed. John C. Welchman (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), 108.

<sup>9</sup> This work was on exhibit in *Schere—Stein—Papier: Pop-Musik als Gegenstand Bildender Kunst*, Kunsthau Graz, June 6 to August 30, 2009. On the partnership between Art & Language and The Red Krayola, see Diedrich Diederichsen, "Echos von Spiegelsounds in goldenen Headphones: Wie Kunst und Musik einander als Mangelwesen lieben," *Texte zur Kunst* 60 (December 2005), 50ff.

<sup>10</sup> See Diedrich Diederichsen, "Studiokopf—Materialwand—Objekthärte," in *Schere—Stein—Papier*, eds. Pakesch and Diederichsen. Here, the author highlights the disruption of relations formed by the culture industry as one of the main characteristics of pop art (17ff.).

<sup>11</sup> From the song "Keep All Your Friends," included in various versions on Art & Language and The Red Krayola, *Corrected Slogans* (Music-Language, 1976) and The Red Krayola with Art & Language, *Kangaroo?* (Rough Trade, 1981).

Finally, the installation includes an extremely significant modification of the conventional karaoke setting. Whereas in the usual karaoke the instrumental versions of songs are played and participants sing the lyrics,<sup>12</sup> in the work of Art & Language and The Red Krayola the integral original versions, including the singing, are played. The supposed moment of empowerment granted to hobby vocalists in the conventional setting is denied them here, or at least there is no attempt to make it the defining characteristic of the elaborate installation.<sup>13</sup> While anyone can sing or bellow along as heartily as he or she wishes, the installation does not depend on the participation aspect, the subjective factor, so to speak. It is as though the artists do not want to saddle the visitors with responsibility or with the obligation to recognize the music (given that it is known only to the initiated). Or as though any visitors familiar with the sounds could join in the singing as the whim takes them, as has always been the case for pop fans listening at home or at public concerts, without any particular guidance being required.

The sensory overload orchestrated here is entirely unspectacular, if not to say unremarkable. The only element that does not fit are the above-mentioned breaks within the conventional, but here strangely reconstructed setting of the karaoke bar. The choice of the installation format leads *Karaoke Bar* to expose a sensorium in which almost every aspect of music reception (e.g., the songs, the original sound, the read-along texts, diverse accessories, posters, magazines) is individually addressed, indeed is practically spelled out in full. It is as if nothing should be left to chance when it comes to listening to this music; as if the degree of freedom with respect to an art form that once promised liberty were laid down in advance. What is missing from the installation, therefore (notwithstanding that they are overaddressed), are the visitors themselves. Through the abundance of media in the installation, the visitors are reminded of how creative and empowering it must have been to receive music in quite another way—whether in private or at concerts. In contrast, the *détournement* of the popular karaoke booth format, in which the musical added value is channeled in the direction of an omnisensorial stimulation, reveals the degree of *muffling* of the recipient (to put it pointedly) that accompanies today's frequent over-determination of music reception. This muffling is counteracted by the breaks in the installation, and it is this tension that lends the work its relevance and value.

## Mute

Whereas in works such as *Karaoke Bar* the sensory capacity is elaborated on the reception side (though not without an undercurrent of criticism of the public), in other works it is the capacity and incapacity on the production side that is held up for examination. In this context, mention must be made not only of the exemplary status of the many “Making of” publications with which the starving music industry has been trying to boost its dwindling sales markets for years. In addition, numerous artists—for instance, Rodney Graham, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Henrik Håkansson, Saâdane Afif, and Cory Arcangel—have repeatedly dealt with different aspects of music making, focusing to a greater or lesser extent on particular technical abilities. Regardless of the emphasis on instrumental or vocal skills—or even the entire production setting, which is just as often the case—in most of these approaches the making remains entirely in the

<sup>12</sup> Literally translated, karaoke means “empty orchestra”; cf. one of the earliest ethnomusicological descriptions of the phenomenon in Charles Keil, “Music Mediated and Live in Japan (1984),” in *Music Grooves: Essays and Dialogues*, ed. Charles Keil and Steven Feld (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 247–256.

<sup>13</sup> For the first reviewlike study of this genre, see Toru Mitsui and Shuhei Hosokawa, eds., *Karaoke around the World: Global Technology, Local Singing* (London: Routledge, 1998).

hands (or vocal chords) of individual protagonists. Rarely, by contrast, are particular aspects of the production delivered entirely over to the public.

The project *Reverse Karaoke* (2005) by Kim Gordon and Jutta Koether hands music-making back to the recipients, who are required to do more than simply sing along.<sup>14</sup> At the core of the work is the opportunity for visitors to use the available equipment to add different instrumental tracks to a preexisting vocal track. This work goes beyond simple interaction performances, where the push of a button or the click of a mouse will create an artwork. Here, the kind of interaction, or better still, the way the material provided will be rounded out by the visitors, is left open, although the choice of the available instruments, the recording technology, and the video manual on hand of course represent important components. The sensory deficit, if it may be so called, consists in this case in the absence of instrumental accompaniment. Only the vocal track is provided, and it is delivered over to a public that is willing (or perhaps unwilling) to participate and now free to devote itself in real time to the production of a more or less complete track. In addition, the usual economy of the senses that predominates in exhibitions—an excess of the visible and audible, faced with which the recipients become no more than absorbing vessels—is turned on its head. At the core of the work is not the passive absorption of a prefabricated product, but rather improvised on-site composition—with minimal guidance and at the same time an emphasis on the fact that the openness of the process is more important than the outcome. “The point is to reverse to some extent the social aspects of the production of art and its specific social environment,” says Jutta Koether.<sup>15</sup> Kim Gordon explains with reference to the first venue in which the project was implemented: “The gallery [South London Gallery] is located in a poor area of London, and there are many projects there seeking to move the community, encouraging them to participate. I liked this idea of turning the public into the performance and at the same time hearing somebody singing from somewhere.”<sup>16</sup>

What *Reverse Karaoke* accomplishes through its experimental design is a reversal of established authorship relations. The do-it-yourself aspect is a central element of the work, but is not absolutized as do-anything-you-want, given that there is a clear guideline and that interacting with this voice represents the real core of the installation. The task is not to add an individual voice, with more or less range of variation, to an existing piece of music, perhaps to achieve the feeling of being “a star,”<sup>17</sup> or perhaps to spoil the melodies that one loves or cannot get out of one’s head. *Reverse Karaoke* is not about this fleeting and fragile idea of empowerment. On the contrary, it turns the established production apparatus of pop and rock music on its head. For in the normal course of events, all the instrumental tracks are recorded before the voice is added at the very end, usually following numerous takes. By reversing this procedure, *Reverse Karaoke* not only validates a different way of making music (a top-down approach, one might say), but also gives the users the possibility of experiencing a totally different economy of the senses and of creativity. It is as though artificially *muting* the visitors, or relieving them of the burden of verbal expression, allows for another capacity to move to the fore: be it an earnest

<sup>14</sup> Exhibited, or rather released for use, in the South London Gallery in November 2005 and in MAK, Vienna, May 2007 (among others); see [http://www.electra-productions.com/about/touring\\_reverse\\_karaoke.shtml](http://www.electra-productions.com/about/touring_reverse_karaoke.shtml).

<sup>15</sup> Christian Steinbrink and Hanno Stecher, “Sensational Fix: Interview mit Kim Gordon und Jutta Koether,” *INTRO.DE* (June 18, 2009), <http://www.intro.de/news/newsfeatures/23055201/sensational-fix-das-komplette-interview-mit-kim-gordon-sonic-youth-und-jutta-koether>.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Max Dax and Jan Kedves, “Sensationelle Korrekturen der eigenen Geschichte—Kim Gordon/Sonic Youth,” *Spex* (March/April 2009), 2009, 99.

functional approach that compensates for this lack or a cheerful dabbling about—but in any case, the creation of a group or a constellation around a center that can be filled with all sorts of things. The result is a highly eloquent sound production which is uncertainly balanced between subjective arbitrariness and objective determinedness. Thus, the sensorium is *initiated*, and not only passively *served*, by the project.

## Blind

The production/reception axis is utilized by artistic experiments such as *Reverse Karaoke* and *Karaoke Bar* not as the articulation of a fan position of whatever nature, but in order to elevate the specific economy of the senses within established music reception (and especially that of the popular karaoke format) to the object of discussion. Whereas hypertrophic orchestrations of pop culture such as Mike Kelley's *Sex, Drugs, and Rock and Roll Party Palace* are primarily about shifting to center stage, as it were, the whole hullabaloo that now accompanies pop culture or is seductively promised by it, and overriding what was once the core of this culture, namely the music, with a clanging cacophony, the karaoke settings described here provide other models of interaction. In the first case, the oeuvre of a band from a certain historical period is transferred into a contemporary and at the same time overdetermined reception format. In the second, the reverse approach is taken: the public is obliged to clothe a ready-made element (the singing) with a self-made compositional garment. If in one case it is the overcoded reception that renders the required interaction (the singing along) almost redundant, in the other it is the conspicuous omission (the absence of the music) that calls forth a certain behavior by the public. The very fact that the users are offered the possibility of completion allows a moment of production to come explicitly and actively to bear—a moment that remains concealed behind all reception behavior.

The film installations by Mathias Poledna demonstrate that the economy of the senses fed by musical pop culture can also be analyzed in quite a different way. In his case, the object of discussion is not so much particular reception patterns or the bombast borne along by pop these days, but rather the more specific moments of production or the combinations manifested in interactions of images and sounds. Whereas the work *Actualité* (2001) examines the mode of production of a particular pop style (in this case, post-punk or related historical offshoots) on the basis of sampling, provisionality, and the sociality that manifests itself in the latter, *Western Recording* (2003) is entirely dedicated to the recording setting of pop music as a vocal track is realized, where the aspects of construction, the change of perspective, and control are the central issues.<sup>18</sup> By contrast, *Version* (2004) operates entirely without sound and reveals a rhythmic choreography that is deeply inscribed with a particular musicality even though it is not possible to infer an identifiable sound. Whereas in *Version* corporeity, movement, and the immanence of the image are the focus of attention, *Crystal Palace* (2007) reverses this process of reduction—the representation of musicality by nonacoustic means—through a different principle.<sup>19</sup> The principle behind this film installation might be described as giving sound to an image, however reduced it might be, and creating a condensed resonance space for it. But the crucial point is less the effort to designate visibility per se as having

<sup>18</sup> Cf. the catalogs *Mathias Poledna: Actualité* (Frankfurt: Revolver, 2002) and *Mathias Poledna: Western Recording* (Rotterdam/Vienna: Witte de With/Museum moderner Kunst Wien, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> This work has been or will be on view at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (Winter/Spring 2007); the Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne (Fall 2007); the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York (Fall 2008); and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (Fall 2010).

sound characteristics in some form, than to construct a hearing space that may originate in the image space shown, but that does not ultimately coincide with it. This work thus falls in line with artistic approaches for which the radical reduction of a sense (seeing, for example) represents the point of departure for the exploration of other realms of sensuality.

The three takes of *Crystal Palace*, which are roughly of equal length, indulge themselves visually in an almost limitless “all over.”<sup>20</sup> The tropical scenery awakens the impression that its exterior exists only in different incidences of light and in varying wind conditions. It seems that the dense texture of the image contains no ambivalence whatsoever. Not so for the soundtrack, whose oscillation between naturalness and artificiality manifests itself increasingly as the film progresses. The first section is dominated by a steady, high-frequency, and rapid vibrato tone, which is constantly interrupted by lower-toned or slower birdsong. Here, as in subsequent sections, it is difficult to identify the actual sources of the different acoustic components, apart from individual whistling and chirping sounds. For example, in the second take a polyphonic sound with a sharply percussive impact (similar to rapid cymbal clashes) is accompanied by whistling sounds that rise above the rhythm track like brief solos. Toward the end, it seems more and more that these solos might be looped; at the same time, the impression of an increasingly synthetic whistling noise becomes evident. Finally, in the third section (in the foreground and to the left, one sees an apparently gnawed-away tree with several trunks that meet higher up), a deep acoustic space opens up, in which many voices again sound simultaneously. This deep space is infused with apparently electronic feedback that toward the end becomes increasingly prolonged and increasingly intense. So much for the phenomenological survey of an ear unschooled in tropical rainforest sounds.

The most striking characteristic of *Crystal Palace*, apart from its rich cultural-historical references,<sup>21</sup> is the creation of a hearing space in which the sound sources cannot be clearly determined. Although many of the perceptible sounds in all probability have their origin in the visible image space, it remains unclear how these soundtracks have been elaborated, modified, or even substituted or newly mixed. Just as the classic natural-sounds disc *Sounds of a Tropical Rain Forest in America* (Folkways Records, 1952) mainly consists of recordings from the New York Bronx zoo,<sup>22</sup> so too the soundtrack of *Crystal Palace* makes use of a variety of montage and editing techniques, in this case with electronic equipment. The obscure, the implied, and the nonvisible have a decidedly productive function: what cannot be seen (e.g., whether a sound is digitally created or actually originates from a natural source) contributes all the more emphatically to the configuration of a sound environment in which voices pile on top of voices, background noises on top of background noises, and even rhythms on top of rhythms. As though the point were no longer to present an authentic, clearly locatable, and classifiable sound on the basis of field recordings, for example, but instead to suggest that the sound of nature has always been interwoven with recording and editing apparatus—which is how *Crystal Palace* represents the relationship between its image and sound levels.

In this respect, the *music* of the rainforest may represent an outer limit of the pop and avant-garde imaginarium. It is not for nothing that ethnomusicologists have repeatedly sought out the rainforest in order to explore its sounds and

<sup>20</sup> Russell Ferguson, “From the Crystal Palace,” in *Mathias Poledna: Crystal Palace* (Los Angeles: Regents of the University of California, 2007), 24.

<sup>21</sup> See Ferguson, “From the Crystal Palace.”

<sup>22</sup> See the relevant notes in Jan Tumliir, “Mathias Poledna: UCLA Hammer Museum,” *Artforum* (April 2007); and Jan Tumliir, “Sci-Fi Historicism,” *Flash Art* 253 (March/April 2007).

thus identify a kind of crystalline, unwritten leaf of our culturalized hearing.<sup>23</sup> As for the silence at one end of the spectrum and the absolute cacophony, the clashing of multifarious and arbitrary sound sources at the other, it is difficult to assign this sound a use in entertainment culture. And yet this sound, this ultimate limit, represents a kind of constitutive periphery of the pop-music sound spectrum especially when it enters into an inextricable synthesis with electronic methods of production and elaboration. The fact that in the ear a hybrid is created of natural and synthetic sound, of untouched auto-acoustic and the intervening apparatus, gives this marginal phenomenon an illumination that equally engages both the auditory and the visual space. Moreover, the excessiveness that swells up in the apparently natural sound space becomes a congenial counterpart to the limited visual content, whose wealth is ultimately also concealed in its minimal texture.

This kind of approach to image/sound relationships is thus just as heuristic, and therefore knowledge-promoting, as the karaoke formats discussed above. The economy of the senses, as it is served by forms of pop and entertainment culture, cannot be reduced to a simple relationship of images being translated into sounds and vice versa. As the artistic approaches discussed here illustrate, in the image/sound *mélange* of pop culture there are excesses (and deficits) everywhere—imbalances that can be grasped and further elaborated through the use of artistic means. Not in order to counterbalance one against the other or to create a new equilibrium between them, but in order to reflect against their common functionality new economies, new (im-)proportionalities, new values, and new distributions. It is only when such new weightings are taken into account that the element of transgression that was once ascribed to pop culture will become easier to assess in retrospect.

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<sup>23</sup> See the work of Steven Feld, especially his CD *Voices of the Rainforest* (Rykodisc, 1991) as well as the remarks and analyses related to it in his essay "From Schizophonia to Schismogenesis: On the Discourses and Commodification Practices of 'World Music' and 'World Beat,'" in Keil and Feld, *Music Grooves*, 275ff. Chris Watson is another prominent representative in the realm of field recordings (see <http://www.chriswatson.net/>).

## Die Tödliche Doris *Gehörlose Musik* (1998)



– Stills from documentation of performance of *Gehörlose Musik* (1998) by Die Tödliche Doris.  
Courtesy Wolfgang Müller.

*Gehörlose Musik* (Deaf Music) is the posthumous translation of an early record release by the Berlin-based experimental band Die Tödliche Doris, which became known under the moniker Geniale Dilletanten. In this project, the band's music is visualized entirely in sign language. "Is there music beyond notes, sound, and noise? Is there such a thing as 'deaf music?'" asks Wolfgang Müller, a founding member still active in the band. The answer, given during a 1998 performance in Berlin, belongs entirely to the realm of mimicry and gestures. Music "expressed entirely within and through the body, gestures, movement, interaction and facial expression" is certainly not a novelty,<sup>1</sup> yet its effect is astonishing when it develops its own momentum with respect to its underlying acoustic objects—at least for those whose sensory faculties allow them to make the comparison, if not for the recipients for whom the translation is really intended. The record with the simple title *Die Tödliche Doris* was recorded in 1981 by a trio who had more gestural than technical mastery over their instruments. Songs such as "Der Tod ist ein Skandal" (Death Is a Scandal) and "M. Röck: Rhythmus im Blut" (M. Röck: Rhythm in the Blood) evidence the band's neo-dadaist impulses. The opening track, "Stümmel mir die Sprache" (Maim Me the Language), lays down a kind of programmatic motto. This programmatic approach applies not least to the actual translation into sign language, for listeners are treated to a visual-artistic elevation that results specifically from the translation itself. Meanwhile, those who can only see are able for the first time to experience a music that, through its unruly style, eludes simple illustration.

<sup>1</sup> Wolfgang Müller, quotation from the DVD booklet of Die Tödliche Doris, *Gehörlose Musik in gebärdensprachlicher Gestaltung* (Berlin: Edition Kröthenhayn, 2006), n.p.

Mathias Poledna  
*Actualité* (2001)



– Still from *Actualité* (2001) by Mathias Poledna.  
 © Mathias Poledna.

The scene, filmed in a Los Angeles studio, shows a rehearsal by a fictitious band reminiscent of the British post-punk movement of the late 1970s. The shifting camera alternates between the musicians, breaking away from each of them in a kind of nervous searching. The musical pieces played by the film band seem like vaguely vicarious doubles of historical source material (Gang of Four, Au Pairs, Delta 5, etc.). A historical bridge of sorts was created by the core of the American band The Red Krayola—consisting of Mayo Thompson, Tom Watson, and George Hurley—who prepared rough versions for the songs sketched in the film, which were then reinterpreted by the Californian actors in the film. However, in the film sequence these historical filters are relegated to such an extent to the (darkened) background that the presence of what is actually visible overshadows all external references. In this and other ways, *Actualité* alludes to the theme of re-envisioning. The year 1979 in the British music scene was above all the year that brought a massive new departure in many directions following the first wave of punk. From the outset, “New Wave” was too homogenous a term for this drive; *Actualité* restores the sense of an open, as yet unchanneled innovative thrust that was lost in the hasty standardization. The attempts of the film band to develop a rhythmic pattern (“go somewhere,” “start a beat”) are a constant stop-and-start endeavor, and the camera appears to underline this searching and approximation by moving relentlessly across the details of the scene without ever capturing it as a whole.

Mathias Poledna  
*Western Recording (2003)*



– Still from *Western Recording (2003)* by Mathias Poledna.  
© Mathias Poledna.

Mathias Poledna's film installation *Western Recording* examines the production aspect of pop music and, in particular, a very specific studio setting. The ten-and-a-half-minute 16-mm film depicts a vocal recording session. The song, presented here in its developmental stage, is "City Life," rendered famous in 1969 by Harry Nilsson. The viewer sees a singer ("played" by Los Angeles-based musician Jason Falkner) in a recording room from two alternating camera angles. The first is a close-up, shot through the window of the control room, in which the enormous microphone (in a sense, the film's supporting actor) partially conceals the singer's face. The second is a medium-long shot taken from an oblique angle, with the camera located in the recording booth itself. In addition to the microphone, this shot takes in other details of the studio furnishings, such as the early-1960s-style wood paneling and the sound-absorbent partition walls. Nonetheless, it is difficult to tell whether the film is a period piece or a contemporary documentation of an everyday recording session. The repeated alternation between the two takes of "vocal track without musical accompaniment" and "music with singing" reveals the media-based fragmentation and constructed nature of the recording situation. The apparent coherence of the production process is further split by the serial sequence of the takes: the interior view (interestingly represented by the medium-long shot) succeeds the control-room view (interestingly realized as a close-up), followed by another interior view and so on, until the whole process repeats itself in a loop.

Kim Gordon and Jutta Koether  
*Reverse Karaoke* (2005)



– Installation view of *The Club in Shadow—Reverse Karaoke* (2005–present) by Kim Gordon and Jutta Koether, from the exhibition *Her Noise* at South London Gallery 2005. Courtesy the artists and South London Gallery.

The interactive installation *Reverse Karaoke* is composed of a gray-painted yurt-style tent equipped with musical instruments and recording technology. The tent is furnished with the kinds of accessories found in club interiors—glitter, screens, velvet, and fake fleeces. A brief introductory video explains how to use the equipment, while an integrated CD burner and design tools (e.g., rubber stamps for decorating CD covers) are provided for packaging the products created within the tent. As in all karaoke settings, a prerecorded music track is also made available, with the difference that it is not an instrumental version of a well-known hit, but a specially composed vocal track. Sung by Kim Gordon (of Sonic Youth), the “Song for Reverse Karaoke” provides the rhythm, the pitch, the thematic orientation, and the emotional tone. The plaintive piece, “Gonna get you back / Gonna follow you down / Down the road / Where you’re from,” commences with reiterations and variations, until an increasingly threatening undertone begins to creep in. The visitors are invited to compose and record on-site various instrumental tracks to the vocals. This “reverse karaoke” challenges the musical and improvisational fantasy of the visitors, with the focus on autonomous use of the equipment provided. In fact, the experiment has met with such keen interest that by mid-2009 over one thousand recordings had been made and packaged in self-crafted covers (with one copy given to the creators, and the other stored in the project archives).

## Art & Language and The Red Krayola *Karaoke Bar* (2005)



- Installation view of *Karaoke Bar* (2005) by Art & Language with The Red Krayola.  
Photo: Universalmuseum Joanneum, N. Lackner, courtesy the artists.

Between 1976 and 1983, the conceptual art group Art & Language engaged in a series of musical collaborations with the rock band The Red Krayola, which they revisited in 2005 in their installation *Karaoke Bar*. The setting of this work is modeled on the typical layout of a karaoke bar: two benches face the standard karaoke projection of lines of text against a blue background, with the lines changing from red to yellow as the song progresses; a cocktail table holds a microphone, which visitors are free to use; the wall sports a gallery of posters that shed light on the historical context of the collaboration. Visitors to karaoke bars can usually consult thick catalogs listing the numerous sing-along songs available; Art & Language and The Red Krayola provide copies of magazines such as *The Fox and Art-Language*, which in the mid-1970s expounded the group's theoretical superstructure. Likewise, the posters on the wall are not typical for the setting, but rather include record sleeves and posters taken from *Art-Language*. For example, the collection features the grotesquely misshapen and coiled man, arms extended like a snail's antennae, who graced the cover of *Corrected Slogans* (1976, re-released in 1982), as well as woodcut-like industrial workers in the style of popular socialist realist iconography. The music featured in *Karaoke Bar* consists of the joint recordings by Art & Language and The Red Krayola, in which catchy refrains alternate with unconventional recitatives with Marxist-Leninist language. Even thirty years after their composition, they have lost none of their historical incisiveness.

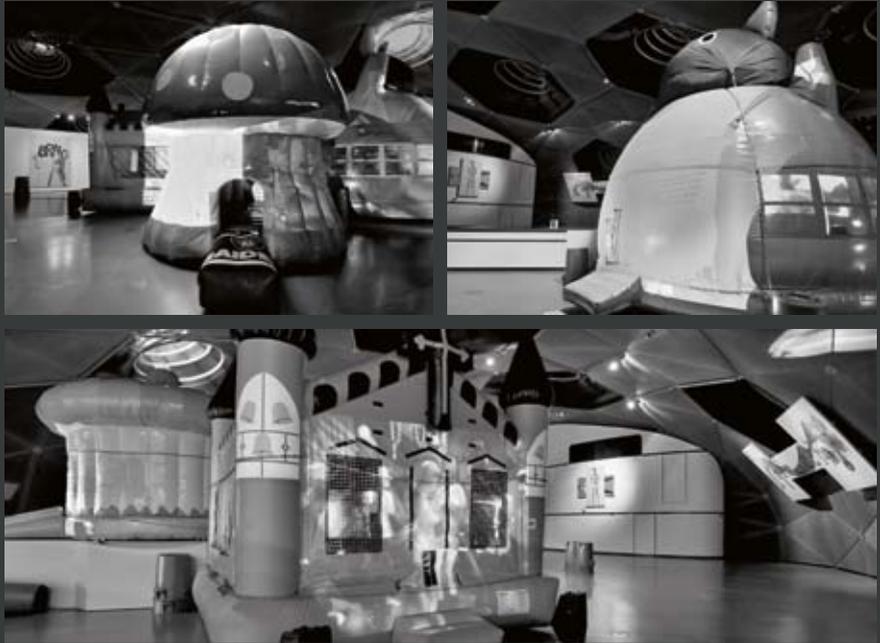
Mathias Poledna  
*Crystal Palace* (2007)



– Still from *Crystal Palace* (2007) by Mathias Poledna.  
 © Mathias Poledna.

The film *Crystal Palace* consists of three uncut, medium-close to medium-wide takes depicting views of the tropical rainforest in the Southern Highland Province of Papua New Guinea. Each of the roughly ten-minute shots merges entirely into the minimalist scenery of the rainforest; in other words, these unedited recordings of a vegetative thicket are made with a static camera which occasionally focuses to a greater or lesser extent on individual plants. The contemplative quality of the images lies entirely in their subtle texture, the intensity of the color with its numerous shades of green, and the apparently seamless “all-over” view of the foliage. It seems there is no exterior and only the most minor variations even in the visible frame; the only changes within the shots are slight movements caused by the wind and resultant slight modifications in the incidence of light. The soundtrack is similar and yet completely different. It is dominated by a distinctive and dense polyphony that develops its own momentum in each of the three different takes. Although one initially seems to be hearing pure ambient sound, toward the end of the film there is reason to suspect that the whole work is supported by an electronically produced soundtrack. The indeterminable and conceptually open soundtrack suggests an expanded space of resonance reminiscent of the conditions under which conventional field recordings are made, but at the same time it reminds the eye and ear of its constructional component. The equally hermetic and crystalline image/sound montage of *Crystal Palace* demonstrates the kind of acoustic vanishing lines that can emerge from a visually dense image—and vice versa.

Mike Kelley  
*Sex, Drugs, and Rock and Roll Party Palace (2009)*



– Installation view of *Sex, Drugs, and Rock and Roll Party Palace* (2009) by Mike Kelley  
 Photo: Universalmuseum Joanneum, N. Lackner, courtesy the artist.

The large-scale installation *Sex, Drugs, and Rock and Roll Party Palace* consists of several inflatable structures (or “bouncy castles”) like those found at fairs and amusement parks. The architectonic forms, including a church and an oversized mushroom, recall the Fantasy and Gothic genres. Excerpts from pornographic films are projected from a number of different directions throughout the *Party Palace*, so that the colorfully domed inflatable castles are bombarded by a veritable excess of images. In addition, individual chambers and alcoves resound with the acoustic stimulation of muffled, functional techno beats, as if the already evident nature of the “sex corners” built into the architecture required even further emphasis. Thus, lawless acoustic disorder is combined with pornographic, body-fixated deviance. The projections are punctuated with short encyclopedic inserts in which a huge range of largely unknown soundtrack composers (such as Lenny Dee, Richard Ellsasser, and John Duffy) is presented. The short, biographical sketches display an apocryphal, in-depth knowledge of music that may have little significance on the level of porn and sexploitation films, but that is an important component on the production level. Finally, the soundtrack contributes decisively to lending the work’s visual appeal a “zeitgeisty” and occasionally subcultural flair. *Sex, Drugs, and Rock and Roll Party Palace* takes this flair at its word and couples it with a childishly airy entertainment architecture whose eeriness is only reinforced by the nature of the projections.