

Print Run

New music books: devoured and dissected

WIRE

Adventures in Modern Music

Rock/Music Writings

Dan Graham

Primary Information Pbk 219pp

New York artist Dan Graham's theoretical texts on art, music and popular culture were first published in various magazines and art journals. They were eventually collected together in book form by MIT Press as *Rock My Religion: Writings And Projects 1965–1990* (1993) and *Two-Way Mirror Power: Selected Writings By Dan Graham On His Art* (1999), both of which are long out of print. In these essays, Graham laid out his theories on rock and pop music as a viable art form, comparing its cultural and intellectual development with the 60s Pop Art movement that had been manufactured and championed by the likes of Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. For those who have since been intrigued by Anne Hilde Neset's recent article on Graham and his work (*The Wire* 304) or frustrated by the high prices his books now demand, *Rock/Music Writings* makes for essential reading.

Collections of rock/pop music writing by a single author usually seem stale by the time they have been filleted from the magazines they originally appeared in. When talking to Neset, Graham admitted to being influenced by such rock writers as *Crawdaddy* magazine founder Paul Williams, Jon Savage and especially Greil Marcus (elements of which flicker through here), but unlike those writers Graham approaches the subject as a painter would a canvas or a sculptor with a freshly mined block of marble – to bring to rock writing a sense of external creation where the typed pages of the finished essay, the layout and the published book could be viewed as paintings or sculptures, art objects in their own right.

In his dissection of The Beatles' "All You Need Is Love", the song is laid out and carefully analysed until it resembles a piece of concrete poetry rather than the peace mantra that The Beatles presented to the world. By doing so, Graham reinforces the power of the group's simple chant – where

the repetition of the single word 'love' becomes a command, directed to their followers to love one another. Read this way, The Beatles' message of hope becomes (although more minimal) as powerful as The Sex Pistols' "God Save The Queen", the well aimed Molotov cocktail of frustration Rotten and co hurled at the media a decade later. In "Punk As Propaganda", Graham celebrates UK punk rock as a defiantly anti-art movement, compared to US groups like Devo and The Ramones, who owe more to deconstruction, performance art and (in The Ramones' case) the cartoon strip Pop Art of Roy Lichtenstein.

Graham's seminal "Rock My Religion" essay (which later evolved into a video) links the religious ideologies of Ann Lee's Shaker movement via the hellfire sermonising of Jerry Lee Lewis and the early rock idol worship of poet, artist and musician Patti Smith, before transforming into a rock 'god' herself. Elsewhere, "New Wave Rock And The Feminine" discusses

the way female (and female-led) groups like Blondie, Siouxsie And The Banshees, X-Ray Spex, The Raincoats, The Slits and Ut have pushed rock into new areas of artistic self-expression and attitude. Further along, "McLaren's Children" focuses on the entrepreneurial career of Sex Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren and, more importantly, examines the provocatively sexual role that 14 year old Bow Wow Wow singer Annabella Lwin was urged to play out before getting caught up in the grinding gears of McLaren's media manipulated music machine.

Graham continuously returns to these ideas as the book advances, until a giddy feeling of déjà vu gradually overcomes the reader. Sections, quotes and lyrics taken from one essay are reworked and re-inserted elsewhere, and the book merges together to form a single artwork that transcends rock writing – while celebrating it at the same time.

Edwin Pouncey