

# BOOKFORUM

## ROCK/MUSIC WRITINGS

BY DAN GRAHAM

NEW YORK: PRIMARY INFORMATION.

224 PAGES. \$18.

Dan Graham's migratory approach to media was on full view in his recent traveling retrospective, where you could see many an "artwork," published in a commercial magazine, that later became an "essay," reproduced in a museum publication or critical anthology. Same thing with *Rock/Music Writings*: A number of the texts here (there are thirteen in all) didn't originate on the page or are better known in other forms.

The most famous, "Rock My Religion," from the early '80s, started off as a video juxtaposing, with Godardian ruptures, the histories of rock music and the Shakers, religious dissidents who emigrated to America in the late eighteenth century. "New

Wave Rock and the Feminine" began as a lecture accompanied by audio clips at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London in 1980. Both are successful as essays—although "Rock My Religion" is arguably more interesting in video form. Others writings, such as "All You Need Is Love" and "Country Trip," look more like concrete poetry or text-based artworks.

Within this antiformat format, however, certain elements recur. "Late Kinks" opens the same way his benchmark photo essay *Homes for America*, 1966–67, does: with a two-column list (in the former, of songs; in the latter, of American postwar tract-housing developments). Similarly, a thesis develops throughout his essays. *Rock/Music Writings* describes how late-'70s and early-'80s punk and post-punk challenged the practices and assumptions of rock from the '50s to the early '70s and how performers like Patti Smith, the Ramones, and Devo and producers like Malcolm McLaren used provocation, irony, appropriation, and other strategies to critique what had, in a couple decades, gone from being a revolutionary cultural form to a stultified, homogenized, corporatized one.

There is a lot of repetition, and a heavy retread of ideas from Dick Hebdige's 1979 *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, the classic cultural-studies text that made punk rock acceptable academic fodder. (This is a criticism easily made in retrospect, however: When Graham was writing these pieces—mostly between 1979 and 1984—the post-punk scene in the US and UK was current culture, and the theorists he cites, from Lacan to Kristeva, were not quite the art-historical household names they are now.) There's also a lot of overlap between what's here and what has appeared in other Graham publications. This isn't a *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* or a *Donald Judd: Complete Writings*—and when it comes to style, Graham is no Smithson or Judd. He writes like the bands that inspired him; it's like listening to a didactic, heavy-handed Minor Threat or Gang of Four song (without the humor).

Yet by giving his (positive) attention to pop music—the flip side of someone like Adorno, who spared only enough energy to scorn it—Graham documents one of the huge shifts in twentieth-century culture. *Rock/Music Writings* is dedicated to Roy Lichtenstein, in whose work, Graham writes, "the deflation/parody of comic book heroes . . . can be likened to Pop art's deflation of the myth of the heroic Abstract Expressionist painter." Graham came a generation or two later than Lichtenstein, and their battles were different. But one can see how an iconoclastic impulse rules this book—and much of his writing. By the late '70s and early '80s, popular culture had long eclipsed art commercially. Graham picks up the task of showing how musicians, much like Lichtenstein's generation of artists, were working to attack their chosen form from within—and often uses their own lyrics and words as evidence. "Pop music is definitely a vulgar art form connected with consumerism," Graham quotes a member of Devo. "The system is totally geared toward profit, obviously. The artist is usually a willing victim because he's a middle-class shit himself."

—MARTHA SCHWENDENER