



DON'T TRUST ANYONE
OVER THIRTY

ENTERTAINMENT BY DAN GRAHAM AND
TONY OURSLER FEATURING JAPAN THER AND THE
HUBER MARIONETTES

Performance, 50 min.; Commissioned and produced by TRANS>. Coproduced by Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Foundation 20 21, New York; Voom/LAB, New York

A satiric history of the promises and contradictions of late 1960s youth culture and its *generational politics* was crystallized in the slogan *Don't trust anyone over thirty*. Likewise, the eponymous opera provides a bitter-sweet reflection on the demise of the psychedelic era: in 1968, Topanga Canyon is the home of hippies, outsiders, and teenagers—and of the puppet-rock-opera's tragic hero Neil Sky (whose name is a fusion of Neil Young and Sky Saxon of The Seeds), and his entourage. These people are not only believers in and practitioners of rock and roll, but also young, beautiful, and famous. The opera's story charts the career of

Neil Sky, who is elected President of the United States after instigating teenage riots to change the voting age to fourteen and putting LSD in the drinking water of the Congress. But after President Sky retires, and the over-thirty population are in LSD re-conditioning camps, he faces his own termination.

Continually splicing disparate media together—opera and rock, live and recorded music, the proscenium and the television screen, the 1960s and the 2000s, real people and puppets—*Don't Trust Anyone Over Thirty* is the result of a collaboration in its best and real sense between a group of artists and musicians.

FOR CHILDREN ONLY?

by CHRIS DERCON

NOT long ago, *Parkett* published a hilarious interview with the artist Dan Graham that was conducted by a ninth-grade student. The student, Carmen Rosenberg Miller, had carefully prepared her *Questionnaire for Mr. Graham*. During the interview, Dan Graham spoke at length about the numerous projects he had made with and for children. It was possibly the most revealing interview Graham had given in a long time.¹

CARMEN MILLER: *Do you like music more than art? Why?*

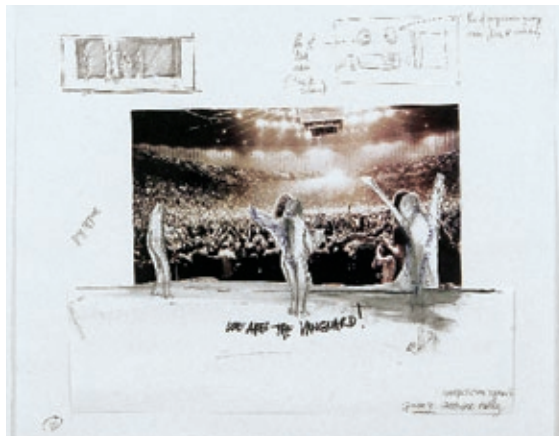
DAN GRAHAM: *I used to love music more than art because it is more play than business ... because it is a form of communalism ... because it creates ecstatic pleasure and is closer to the body ... because it is disposable and about instant clichés of the moment like my first (conceptual) work for magazine pages ... because it is pop culture, which I can experience with normal people ... because it is a kind of hobby, just as my first art was a hobby.*

CM: *Are you still going through your second childhood? How did you know you were a child again?*

DG: *I think I am experiencing my second childhood through my two-way mirror work. I never read Lacan, but I feel my work involves the Lacanian mirror stage of childhood, when the young child first experiences his/her sense or non-sense of an ego. I know that through my art I make new friends. And through my hobbies of rock music, architectural tourism, and travel, I stay young. I know I am a child when I watch other Aries people (I am an Aries) behaving childishly, like me. It's difficult for me to directly answer your question, it's too perceptive for me—or maybe I am not that self-perceptive. But I thoroughly appreciate your question.*



Poster for the movie
Wild in the Streets, 1968



DAN GRAHAM, TONY OURSLER, LAURENT P. BERGER,
Don't Trust Anyone Over Thirty: The Storyboard, 2004
Neil on Stage/Li/Neil Young Cover

WILD IN THE STREETS: THE OPERA

Dan Graham's rock opera for puppets, *Don't Trust Anyone Over Thirty*, has a long history. While it was created in 2004 with his friends, the artists *Tony Oursler*¹ and *Rodney Graham*,² it was originally conceived with the architect Marie-Paule Macdonald in 1987 as a mini-rock opera entitled *Wild in the Streets: the Sixties*. It was intended as a series of performances at the Opera of the Theatre de la Monnaie in Brussels with simultaneous television coverage through Belgian Flemish Television. Dan Graham and other well known artists, such as John Baldessari, Christian Boltanski, James Lee Byars, Daniel Buren, Katharina Fritsch, Rodney Graham, Matt Mullican and William Wegman were invited to address the opera house, the genre of opera, its performance and public in a series of short audio and visual performances. Under the auspices of the director at that time, the experimentalist, Gerard Mortier, the performances were to be broadcast live. Due to inadequate financial support, the series was cancelled. (Interestingly, twenty years later, again involving Gerard Mortier, the Paris version of the experimental opera *Il Tempo del Postino*, curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Philippe Parreno, whose project resembles the earlier Brussels project, got cancelled as well.) For the Brussels opera Dan Graham had planned to have a cast of New York kids aged from 10 to 14 interpret material that he adapted from the 1968 film, *Wild in the Streets*³ (directed by Barry Shear), in the style of urban music that was current then and exemplified by the Beastie Boys. The musical performance was to be set within a psychedelic visual setting that juxtaposed historical references to Arcadian settings with contemporary suburban motives. Different scenes were to have been linked to the main stage via a video feed or prerecorded and displayed on video monitors. Although the original plans remained unrealized, Graham and Macdonald published a book with the libretto and even *pop-up* pages of the stage sets. The book contains a clear description of what the rock opera intended to accomplish: *"The opera's tragi-comic narrative is the reductio ad absurdum of the hippies' generational politics contained in the 1960s youth slogan, Don't trust anybody over thirty."*

I Tony Oursler conceived the psychedelic videos for the opera, which are projected larger than life onto the entire front white wall of the stage structure—designed in collaboration with French set designer and artist Laurent P. Berger—that focuses the energy of the live band in a box on one side, and the puppets in a rectangle on the other side, all connected by one big *video screen* that can change scale whenever needed. Through his videos, which are an integral part of the opera and determine its visual appearance, Oursler brings the puppets by master puppeteer Philip Huber to life and, at the same time, produces a unifying visual connection between the narrative sequences on the puppet stage and the interjected live music of Japanther.

II Rodney Graham, conceptual artist, writer, musician, and actor, and one of the early collaborators of the project, wrote and performed the nostalgic theme song for *Don't Trust Anyone Over Thirty*, and *14 or Fight* that accompany the videos and are counterparts to Japanther's wild post-punk anthems. *"In the time period when this work takes place, ideals were still in place above money, and the theme loosely traces this decline: from utopia to market. I was really thinking of Neil Young and trying to do something along those lines."*

III The 1968 B-movie *Wild in the Streets*—starring Shelly Winters and Richard Pryor—tells the story of Max Flatow, a teenager with a penchant for home-made explosives. When he tires of these, he runs away from home to emerge seven years later, now 22 years old, as Max Frost, the world's most popular rock star and head of a multi-million dollar empire. Frost and his entourage join causes with California Congressman John Fergus to get the vote for 14-year olds. (Hence the song *14 or Fight!*). Eventually, Frost runs for President. Winning in a landslide, he issues his first presidential edict: All oldsters are required to live in *retirement homes* where they are forced to ingest LSD, taking the 1960s slogan *Don't trust anyone over 30* to its most extreme.

¹ DAN GRAHAM in an interview by CARMEN ROSENBERG MILLER, a ninth-grade student at the Bronx High School of Science, published in *Parkett* 68 (2003).



THE CULT OF YOUTH

DAN Graham has worked on similar themes, for example, in one of his earliest essays, *Eisenhower and the Hippies* (1967), as well as an unpublished science fiction film-script that he wrote with the experimental filmmaker Erika Beckman in the 1980s entitled *Arcadia*. In the script, Graham narrates the strikingly different ideals and cultural habitats of the original hippies and the so-called *neo-hippies*. In 1993, *Mike Kelley* ➤ beautifully articulated the concerns that he and Dan Graham share regarding these generational issues. “In *Wild in the Streets: The Sixties Dan Graham and Marie-Paule Macdonald tackle the ageism of the sixties new left and, so too, the continuing ageism of the various subsequent American underground youth movements. For those of us who are now long past the age of thirty, the age at which you become useless, it is a bitter experience to look back and see how a generation was seduced by this cult of youth. We were blind to the fact that our beliefs were a by-product of the capitalist commodity fetishism and planned obsolescence we were supposedly against.*”² Consequently, it might not be that surprising that Dan Graham has staged his newest version of *Wild in the Streets: The Sixties* with puppets on strings—an all marionette cast—instead of a cast of cheery children. Maybe Trey Parker and Matt Stone’s scandalously silly movie *Team America: World Police* was on his mind too! Even the live musicians of *Japanther*^{IV} ➤ seem to be held up by an invisible puppet-master—or is it the kindergarten teacher? Television programs from the 1960s such as *Top of the Pops* frequently used elevated “space frame stages” with “go-go cages” as a kind of franchise package that catered to increasingly younger audiences who were at the mercy of the entertainment industry. The expressionist, gloom-and-doom theatricality of Piscator, Kiesler, and Lang were merely a foretaste of the architectural phantasmagoria still to come.

² MIKE KELLEY, introduction to *Wild in the Streets: The Sixties* by DAN GRAHAM and MARIE-PAULE MACDONALD (Ghent: Imschoot, uitgevers, 1994).

THE ARCHITECTURE OF ROCK

FOR a long time, Dan Graham has been interested in something he calls the architecture of rock. The progression of rock music—from Woodstock to disco and rave—has been associated with a range of architectural and urban spaces. Rock-and-roll films that engage the rich interior spaces of fantastic opera houses such as Brian de Palma’s *Phantom of the Opera* or Marie-Paule Macdonald’s utopian design, *Night Club for the Rolling Stones* (1980), offer an alternative architectural vision to the commercially packaged Hard Rock Café, and they led Dan Graham to test his own spaces for rock. Graham’s collaboration with the composer Glenn Branca in *Musical Performance and Stage Set Utilizing Two-way Mirror and Time-delay*, was displayed in the Bern Kunsthalle in 1983. It involves the self awareness of both the performers and the audience regarding the experience of *being on stage*. In 1994, Graham conceived a series of events, involving this and other aspects of *rock-architecture* featuring Cedric Price, Mayo Thompson, Marie-Paule Macdonald, Fareed Armaly, Rodney Graham, and Tony Oursler for the Staedelschule in Frankfurt.

IV Teresa Seeman, assistant to Dan Graham, brought the Brooklyn duo Japanther into the project. Matt Reilly and Ian Vanék had founded their art project in 2001 when they met at the Pratt Institute, where they both studied Communication Design. The live-performing neo-punk band Japanther represents the antipode to the hippie-puppet-band of Neil Sky & The Sky Tribe in the rock opera. As Dan Graham puts it, “*Japanther bring in the young energy that is so important.*” The tension between what’s happening on the puppet-stage and the rough performance and music by Japanther is a core element of the show. In 2006, Japanther released the soundtrack *Don’t Trust Anyone Over Thirty* with 14 songs.

COLLABORATORS AND FRIENDS

A long time friend of Dan Graham recently described his experience of friendship and collaboration with him. “*Dan Graham does have a way of pounding away at few artists over and over again, wanting to work with them and always bringing up their work in discussion. He loves anything that deals with children, the repressed and its link to the lower middle class and humor: that is why he is such a big supporter of Paul McCarthy.*” The list of Graham’s collaborations and collaborators is quite long and resembles an extended family. Dan

Graham has frequently called upon the architect and architectural critic Marie-Paule Macdonald, musician and composer Glenn Branca, writer and curator Rudiger Schoettle, video artist Tony Oursler, artist photographer Jeff Wall and many others. But there is another side to the coin. Kim Gordon, the bassist of Sonic Youth, wrote in an introduction to Dan Graham’s book, which appeared in 1993, “*Dan was the first person to encourage me to write. By participating in a performance of his, involving an all-girl band, he also encouraged me to play music. Sonic Youth would never have existed without Dan Graham.*”



STRATEGY AND TACTICS

DAN Graham's artistic strategy and tactics are embodied in his many works with mirrors, and they can be best described with the notion of extension. As he has said, "I enjoy that closeness where I take two things that are very close and just slightly overlap them." Dan Graham continually pulls things and people together across a variety of the past and the present, high culture and mass culture, the urban and the suburban, historical monuments and vernacular architecture, and even opera and rock, or the proscenium and the television. At the same time, he deliberately keeps such elements separated in order to *show and tell* how they overlap. For Dan Graham, the present has to be seen within and through the mirror of the past: "Because the ideology of the now has erased the past, we have to reconstruct it as if it was reflected." His manifold juxtapositions and collaborations are extensions of one and the same principle: instead of spectacular celebrations they demonstrate that the project of the avant-garde is so incomplete. Graham privileges music as a medium for this task: "Music, for me, is one of the few ways that popular and historical memory of struggle and alternative values can be grasped and used." *Rock My Religion*³ is a rock video that was begun in 1982 and features Patti Smith as the savior of a rock culture that expresses a true communalism. With the help of Tony Oursler, among others, Graham uses video to produce something that is closer to a rock-film or a rock-documentary. Because "increasingly there was the idea that rock became avant-garde music. It had collated itself with the avant-garde notions of both music and the art world and became transcendental in the way art had been viewed as transcendental; whereas art had become more and more calculatedly a business, also more cynical. In other words, modernism was dead: you couldn't have that self-enclosed purity. But music took on that quality." For Dan Graham, the best way to deal with it was to do something that isn't really a rock video, but that is related to it. As such, the idea for the rock opera *Don't Trust Anyone Over Thirty* was born.

We can't help wondering whether Carmen Rosenberg Miller has seen Graham's puppet rock opera yet. Does she appreciate it?³



DAN GRAHAM, *Rock My Religion*

V In the video documentary *Rock My Religion* (1982–84) Graham explores the history of rock music, beginning with the development of the Shaker religion in America and their practices of ecstatic communal trances, and ending with the emergence of rock music as the religion of teenagers. The music and philosophies of Patti Smith, who made explicit the trope that Rock is Religion, are his focus. This complex collage of text, film footage, and performance forms a compelling theoretical essay on the ideological codes and historical contexts that inform the cultural phenomena of rock music. Graham's video essay works out "the elements that—often unconsciously—make important connections within rock culture. He exposed the subcutaneous traces of a genealogy, which at first seem to be comprised only of the particularly crude and clear appearances that do not make any foundational connections. Graham's theory of performativity, however, clearly exposes the latent element that determines the entirety of classic rock culture, namely, the stabilizing aspect of the performative act that creates community. Graham shows precisely how the celebrated sexuality of the individual, of the star, creates the sense of community. But the community is one that is produced in a quasi-religious manner by independently motivated individuals who have experienced transgressions vis-à-vis hyper-individual performers, instead of priests or sacrificial animals."⁴

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You can't do much in this heat
Except go wild in the street
I mean, it's got to be at least a hundred and three
I'm stickin' to the trees cause my knees ain't right
They can ship you overseas but they can't make you fight

Seems you can't trust anyone over thirty
Based on the shit I've seen
Yeah, don't trust anyone over thirty
'Cause they're fuckin' old and their fuckin' mean
But you better learn to take it if you're gonna dish it out
There's always someone spoils your fun
When your fun has just begun

It's all downhill after twenty-three
I'm President Sky and I decree:
There's always someone spoils your fun
When your fun has just begun

You can't trust anyone over thirty
Based on the shit I've seen
Don't trust anyone over thirty
'Cause they're fuckin' old and their fuckin' mean

Rodney Graham

³ Unless otherwise indicated, all of Dan Graham's quotations are from a videotaped interview that CHRIS DERCON conducted in 1984.

⁴ DIEDRICH DIEDERICHSEN, "Ecstasy and Abstraction," in *Don't Trust Anyone Over Thirty*, ed. T-B A21, pp. 49.