

**VOLUME!**

## Volume !

La revue des musiques populaires

3 : 1 | 2004

Le Savant à l'épreuve du populaire / Musiques électroniques

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Francisco MATTOS (ed.), *Industrial Culture Handbook*

Joshua Gunn

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### Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/volume/2103>

ISSN : 1950-568X

### Éditeur

Association Mélanie Seteun

### Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 15 mai 2004

Pagination : 118-121

ISBN : 1634-5495

ISSN : 1634-5495

### Référence électronique

Joshua Gunn, « Francisco MATTOS (ed.), *Industrial Culture Handbook* », *Volume !* [En ligne], 3 : 1 | 2004, mis en ligne le 15 avril 2006, consulté le 19 avril 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/volume/2103>

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Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 19 avril 2019.

L'auteur & les Éd. Mélanie Seteun

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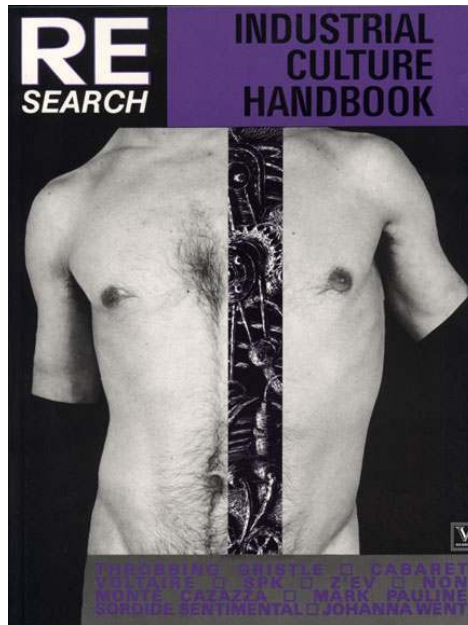
Joshua Gunn

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RÉFÉRENCE

1983 (in continuous reprint). San Francisco: V/Search Publications; p. 1-133; \$15.99 (paper)

- 1 An episode of the the U.S. Public Broadcasting Service documentary series *P.O.V.* titled “Baby, It’s You” (2 June, 1988) captures a glimmer of what is left of that early eighties music-art scene known as “industrial.” In the wake of a newscast detailing new information about the Columbine High School massacre in April, 1999 – a crime initially linked by the press to the “gothic” and «industrial» music consumed by the murderers – the narrator’s voice (Anne Makepeace) invited me to carry the mass killing in memory through her struggles to be a mother. In her documentary about artificial insemination, she gives time to another woman who describes how she and her lover selected a “match” by answering a



questionnaire listing desired characteristics (athletic or nerdy? tall or short?). For a tiny moment the spectator witnesses the product of these questions – a healthy, twelve pound baby (reminiscent of a pink rat) with dark hair and a big, slobbering grin (and nothing that might alert us to its having anything like a mind, the ability to chose its own life or its own death, nor any indication that its touching «down there» is *naughty*). Mother and child are, as far as the babe knows, one and the same being. She chooses for it, and it sucks in appreciation – even on its *other* mother’s breast, as dry and unyielding as it may be.

Such feeding is the dream of fascism. (There is no “mirror.”)

- 2 The politics of natural selection notwithstanding, the bizarre elements of this kind of reproduction strike ominous parallels with the movement carefully documented in the now legendary underground reference book, V/Search’s *Industrial Culture Handbook* (*ICH*). On the alternative bookshelf for well over a decade now, the *ICH* has become an indispensable guide to the underground music known as “industrial” by collecting ten interviews with the most effervescent of its underground luminaries circa 1983: Throbbing Gristle (*the industrialists, par excellence*); Mark Pauline, Cabaret Voltaire, Non (Boyd Rice), Monte Cazazza, Sordied Sentimental, SPK, Z’ev, Johanna West, and the outfit no one east of the Mississippi had still yet to hear of, R&N (“Rhythm and Noise”). No fan, scholar, or journalist of underground culture can live without these interviews, lest she make the unfortunate mistake of referring to Marilyn Mason or KMFD as “industrial.”
- 3 All the parallels between self-consciously liberal documentaries and the *ICH* orbit Leftism (and at times, the industrial camp is explicitly Marxist, as Z’ev’s interview attests). Whereas one offers up subtle commentary in the edits, the other offers up a forceful ambiguity and playfulness. At least in terms of insemination, both institutions offer critiques of control and the fundamentals of fascist thought that have yet to penetrate the popular imaginary (hence, subsidized television; hence, obscure music labels and distribution channels). In retrospect, the (broken) mirror industrial artists offered to their fans was passed up for the glass: Rice (Non) has now collapsed his resistant musical noise onto tones, and channeled his exploratory impulses into areas most of us call

“white supremicisim”; Throbbing Gristle splintered into C.T.I. and Psychic T.V.; Cabaret Voltaire is now most certainly a sonnorral dance-floor enterprise, their originally provocative and disturbing video-collage work defunct in the digital morass; and the performance art of Johanna West has now been commercially appropriated, as any side-show attending Lollapoolooza or similar mass concert groupie can attest (this time, however, there are skin-hooks!). It seems “industrial” as an art movement has come and gone, only to be milked of its most resistant political possibilities by its bastard child, the “rivet head” club culture whose politics is merely a studded jacket for social dancing. Fortunately, the *Industrial Culture Handbook* retains the promise the movement once held.

- 4 The crux of the industrial cacophony--which could be “played at any speed” on the record player--was an interrogation of fascism through the machine. While it is likely no one of the artists featured has read Walter Benjamin’s “Art in the Age of Mechanical [Technical] Reproduction,” each artist expressed a profound interest in exposing the constructedness of their art, the same kind of exposure Benjamin tragically hoped would awaken the masses from the political aestheticism of the Nazis via cinema art. If one defines fascism as an extreme and ultimate form of «control,» then industrial culture was about exploring the conditions of expression under ultimate control. Could the organically dead be revived by motions of the inorganic (witness Mark Pauline)? Could the apparent limitations of machinery be pushed beyond by human spirit (e.g., could we make “metal machine music?”). Could metallic-inspired pain bring us to new insights into the conditions of humanness? New stimulations? New, previously perverse, pleasures?
- 5 The industrial artist’s answers to these questions were always implicitly affirmative. It was as if pent up creative energy – no doubt stifled by the rampant rage and anti-intellectualism of punk – was allowed release, not through pure expression, but through massive and overwhelming control. Emblems of that kind of power that limits – metal and steel--imprisoned the artistic impulse, only to find it seeping out in rhythmic screeches. As any neurotic will tell you, complete control only results in its absolute loss.
- 6 That these kind of procedures – or answers, if you will – existed at all marks “industrial culture” from the start as a semi-intellectual quest, an artistic imperialism that was always ready to counter the perceived means of social control precisely because the aim couldn’t be liquidated into financial marks (no matter how hard they tried, and they did), because of the artists’ embrace of ambiguous forms that denied, at least in name, their own dogma. “Give Your Body Its Freedom,” a phrase made famous by the second wave industrialists, Nitzer Ebb, was the most militaristic of them all – a “dancable” contradiction. Further, industrial art was, from the very beginning, highly individualistic. Nothing is more apparent from reading the disparate commonalities of the artists featured in the *ICH*: These people did not compromise their ideas for the sake of audience retention: Rice says, “If I was a leader of a country, I wouldn’t want some kind of award to go out that I didn’t know about. Like – who the hell put that out? It’s like making records – you don’t want to leave important things like design up to record companies” (65).
- 7 True, these precepts would be violated by Throbbing Gristle’s Genesis P-Orridge with his Thee Temple Ov Psychic Youth, the so-called church of 24-hour-wide-awake-people. Then again, these contradictions are precisely the point, and we are unsure about how much of the memories each artist recalls in their interviews are genuine or embellished. For example, somewhat nostalgic about his late seventies and early eighties performances, Genesis remarks: “I used to do things like stick severed chicken’s heads over my penis,

and then try to masturbate them, whilst pouring maggots all over it..." (17). Unfortunately, these exploits no longer seem as provocative or as likely to shock audiences out of their tidy cognitive maps these days; we are assured, however, that this sort of thing was much more likely to "shock" audiences then into something like reflection – or at least would make them think twice about tripping or rolling before the next show.

- 8 In retrospect, it is easy to say underground music has moved beyond the performance art of industrial musicians; then again, as movies become more violent and high school massacres become the nightly news norm, I begin to wonder where the soundtrack ends and the "real" noise begins. At least the *Industrial Culture Handbook* can point us to a definitive moment when the varieties of mechanical reproduction, sometimes violent varieties, were made art and separated from "life."
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**Mots-clés** : underground / alternative

**Keywords** : underground / alternative

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