

# Artforum, January, 1983

Transcribed by **Dave K**

© 1983 Kim Gordon

## **"I'm Really Scared When I Kill In My Dreams"**

by **Kim Gordon**

In the spring of 1981 the rock group Public Image Ltd. (PiL) played at the Ritz in New York. That club's movie-scale video screen, which functioned as a barrier and was used to create or motivate the crowd's reaction, was the center of the performance. PiL's three members were projected on the screen, both as shadows (they were lit from behind for the video cameras) and as a video picture. A giant image of John Lydon's face, laughing, appeared, larger than the Wizard of Oz. He began singing, and then the live image was changed to a pre-recorded tape of a demented commercial rock video. Furious at the ghostlike, ritualistic silhouettes of the group behind the screen—instead of, as usual, directly in front of them—the crowd constantly interrupted the music. They barraged the screen with bottles, finally tearing it down. The group hadn't intended to cause a riot; in their words, they were trying something new. They did not want to mechanically continue the learned role of rock entertainers. As PiL's Keith Levene remarked in an interview in *ZigZag* magazine in August 1981, "You're more honest putting on a video or sending a video round to do 30 dates, rather than sending a band around to do it ... You're standing up there and saying 'after you've bought my album for so many pounds and heard how great we are now you can stand in front of us and see how great we are....'" PiL has since returned to conventional rock performance.

It is almost necessary for a working rock band on the club circuit to have a booking agent and/or manager. If a club owner deals directly with the band involved, and not with a business peer, then less money is likely to be offered.

The large rock clubs in Manhattan all have basically the same policy of dealing with bands. Some of these are real showcases and some are just facades. Mailings are sent out for special evenings; these nights are not actually special, but they do give the appearance of being playgrounds for the art world, thus luring the non-art world to a supposedly chic event for which they will pay. (As in past movements of the avant-garde, these clubs appropriate the "law of assemblage" in the sense that the "real world" and the "art world" become layered.) In order to maintain an elite aura the clubs also offer their space for "art night" parties or video and film parties which are invitational only. By constantly renovating, opening up new floors and redecorating, each club vies for the position of "favored art club," as a yet newer alternative to the art world's alternative spaces. It seems to be what the art world wants. And on the flip side, the video/music nights at the official "alternative spaces" are designed to replicate the lounge atmosphere of the clubs, with monitors and cushions dispersed informally throughout the rooms. Thus symbiotic relationship has almost become a formula for a certain kind of success in both the art and the club worlds.

The club atmosphere does as little for the art that's "crossing over" as it does for the bands, and tends to subordinate the art to the place itself. Even a vision as personal as Jim Fouratt's when he did the booking at another New York club, Danceteria, can quickly turn into exploitive packaging. The support he gave American bands (with a concentration on local, New York City bands), instead of following the safer policy of booking touring English bands, actually did create an alternative club situation for a short while. His notion of art in clubs—as exemplified by this attitude toward the music—did not merely treat art as interior decoration, but allowed art to maintain a certain integrity. The main attraction in the lounge-style clubs is a sort of skyscraper-style sexual voyeurism set up by projections, on different floor, of different eras and stylized "lifestyles."

Whereas in the club scene of the past there have been what were called "Fuck Rooms," now the atmosphere in clubs is often designed to be more one of sublimation, to the point of a sterility that has become a new sort of non-sexual

eroticism. The notion of resistance—the withholding of contact between people—is a common state in current clubs. Their atmosphere designs distance—from the art, the music, the other people, and oneself. The use of mirrors elaborates the already present narcissism, and individuals become spectators of themselves. Video monitors are standard design apparatus; the images are there to sustain the customers, as business dealings become mingles with fantasies—sexual, career, or otherwise. The lounge atmosphere makes the clientele feel at home or at the home of someone wealthy, creating a comfortable extravagance typical of small, exclusive private clubs. The images shown on the videos are more or less unseen, and function much like televisions left on. In his discourse on the disappearance of the tragic as caused by the disappearance of the subject in art, and its subsequent reappearance, Manfredo Tafuri states, "The experience of the 'tragic' [in this century] is the experience of the metropolis ..." "The 'intensification of nervous stimulation' induced by the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions,' were interpreted by [Georg] Simmel as the new conditions that generate the blase attitude of the individual of the metropolis...." (from *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, 1976.) Unlike a decadent "Great Gatsby" lifestyle, these people all pay \$5.00 to \$15.00 for their pleasure and sexual entertainment. The majority of the bands booked play accessible Dance Oriented Rock.

When you're actually on the stage after dealing with the "rock 'n' roll bullshit" and noticing how the disco sound system is so much louder than the one you're playing through, you pray your instruments don't fall apart and you begin to play. You forget about everything else in the world. You forget how much the pay is and that you're not really playing for enthusiastic young kids but for bored young adults—and it becomes a challenge to try to move them, blow their brains out, put some edge into the atmosphere by using what is now a technologically primitive social tool, the electric guitar.


The club is the mediator or frame through which the music is communicated.

The band literally plugs into the technology of the club in order to magnify the sound, turning a possibility into actually, making what is heard by the musicians themselves accessible to an audience. People pay to see others believe in themselves. Maybe people don't know whether they can experience the erotic or whether it exists only in commercials; but on stage, in the midst of rock 'n' roll, many things happen and anything can happen, whether people come as voyeurs or come to submit to the moment. As a performer you sacrifice yourself, you go through the motions and emotions of sexuality for all the people who pay to see it, to believe that it exists. The better and more convincing the performance, the more an audience can identify with the exterior involved in such an expenditure of energy. Performers appear to be submitting to the audience, but in the process they gain control of the audience's emotions. They begin to dominate the situation through the awe inspired by their total submission to it. Someone who works hard at his or her job is not going to become a "hero," but may make just enough money to be able to afford to be liberated temporarily through entertainment. A performer, however, as the hero, will be paid for being sexually uncontrolled, but will still be at the mercy of the clubs and the way the media shapes identity. How long can someone continue to exert intensity before it becomes mannered and dishonest?

The notion of merging avant-garde and popular culture (multimedia technology) by an artist is found in its most successful form in Laurie Anderson's recent performances. The position that Anderson represents, as one who has transcended the isolation of the art world, involves a different kind of heroics from that of the rock 'n' roll persona, who represents, even if mythically, a sense of real sexuality, real life or death. Anderson's androgynous appearance and mechanical voice create an impression of organized perfection, expressing the ideal as nonsexual. She has created her own atmosphere of mastering and mimicking a technology that is usually mystifying. Wherever she performs, she accomplishes what clubs cannot; she manipulates the audience by the unseen, creating moments that change and move along effortlessly. As in the multimedia

presentations of religious organizations and corporate business, Anderson's seduction suggests, "Sit back and relax, don't think, let us do it for, let us show you how." She is identifying with a higher order of technology-power. The technology that creates the conveniences for a certain kind of "survival" (and with that the appearances of life—eroticism, pleasure) within the commodity system is available to scientists, corporate advertising, and other commercial media, but not to artists. In an effort to attain the same degree of authority as that achieved through a technological seduction, the original intent of the art/artist is exchanged for the "other's" ends, that is, for the appropriation of people.

Elvis Presley, Eddie Cochran, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, Sid Vicious, Darby Crash, and Ian Curtis all died for our sense of "heroics" as opposed to Anderson's conceptual representations of neo-heroics. Using their egos to shape the music—in some cases believing in their media-created image and in others shaping the image themselves, whether or not they believed it—they used that image to destroy, within their own framework, the standard of what had gone before, giving rise to new forms. The audience paid to see them do this, as well as to witness the destruction of the artists' own lives—the illusory freedom becoming an actual freedom....



Picture Credits: (Top to Bottom)

© n/a