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ART ROCKS

From making sculptures out of melted LPs, to creating album covers and music videos, to playing in their own bands, a new generation of artists is blurring the distinction between the worlds of pop music and fine art **By Barbara Pollack**

ELIZABETH DEE GALLERY, NEW YORK

***Melissa*, lead singer of electroclash group W.I.T. (Whatever It Takes), photographed this year by Conrad Ventur.**

"Madonna is dead! Michael Jackson is dead! And Britney Spears is going down!" That's the battle cry sounded by the pop-music sensation Fischerspooner, made up of experimental theater director Casey Spooner and his partner, composer Warren Fischer. In the past two years, Fischerspooner has swept the art world with over-the-top performances that combine music, flamboyant costumes, video projections, and go-go-dancing back-up girls staged at such venues as Gavin Brown's Enterprise and the Jack Tilton Gallery. Now represented by Deitch Projects, Fischerspooner recently signed a four-album deal with EMI/Capitol Records.

While Fischerspooner positions itself in the limelight, behind the scenes, new-media artist Jeremy Blake recently finished the cover designs for *Sea Change*, the album released this fall by triple-Grammy-winning, platinum-album-selling Beck. "In talking to Beck, I found we were on the same page. He is interested in mixing music in a certain way, and I was trying to mix up painting in the same way," says Blake, who is known for his psychedelic video animations, which he shows at Feigen Contemporary and which were featured in the Whitney Museum of American Art's 2001 "Bitstreams" exhibition. The singer-songwriter and the painter-multimedia designer both use digital files rather than musical instruments or paintbrushes, and both emphasize the sampling of existing culture as a principal formal concern.

Fischerspooner and Blake are two of the most visible examples of a new wave of contemporary artists whose projects blur the distinction between popular music and fine art. The relationship between rock 'n' roll and contemporary art dates back to the early days of both. After all, Elvis made more than one appearance on canvases by Andy Warhol, who in turn designed the Rolling Stones' *Sticky Fingers* album cover. And British Pop artist Peter Blake—who is exhibiting at New York's Paul Morris Gallery through the 21st of this month—created the art for the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album cover. But in today's art world, the influence of pop music—from hip-hop and techno to 1960s psychedelia and '90s grunge—is rampant, with artists turning to it not only for subject matter but also for techniques and materials. Visual artists are doing more than designing the occasional album cover now: they are adopting methods such as sampling and remixing, which contemporary music-makers popularized; and they are embracing the hyped-up performance styles of rock musicians in the presentation of their works.

In the past year, several exhibitions have addressed this phenomenon, most notably "Rock My World" at the California College of Arts and Crafts' Wattis Institute, "Remix: Contemporary Art and Pop" at the Tate Liverpool, and "One Planet under a Groove" at the Bronx Museum of the Arts. The works in these exhibitions are often tinged with nostalgia for the rebellious promises rock 'n' roll once made—and sometimes laced with criticism of the commercialism in today's music industry.

"Rock 'n' roll is becoming an historical artifact," explains cultural critic Carlo McCormick, who curated "The LP Show," a traveling exhibition of album covers that opened at New York's Exit Art in 2000. "A lot of the performers who created rock 'n' roll, who didn't die prematurely, are now entering old age; museums are being established; and the people who wrote about the work when it was being made are now turning into historians. So there is this impulse to turn rock 'n' roll, which is rebellious and ephemeral and anti-institutional, into something that can be shown through artifacts, or even artworks."

For McCormick, the merger of rock and contemporary art can be as serendipitous and subversive as the marriage of John

Lennon and Yoko Ono. But now, pop music is too eclectic to launch a unified cultural movement. "There once was a universal language—album covers—that inspired kids from Africa to America," says McCormick. "Records told us where to go, how to dress, what to smoke, and where to buy it. There is no primary source of information anymore; MTV just doesn't do it."

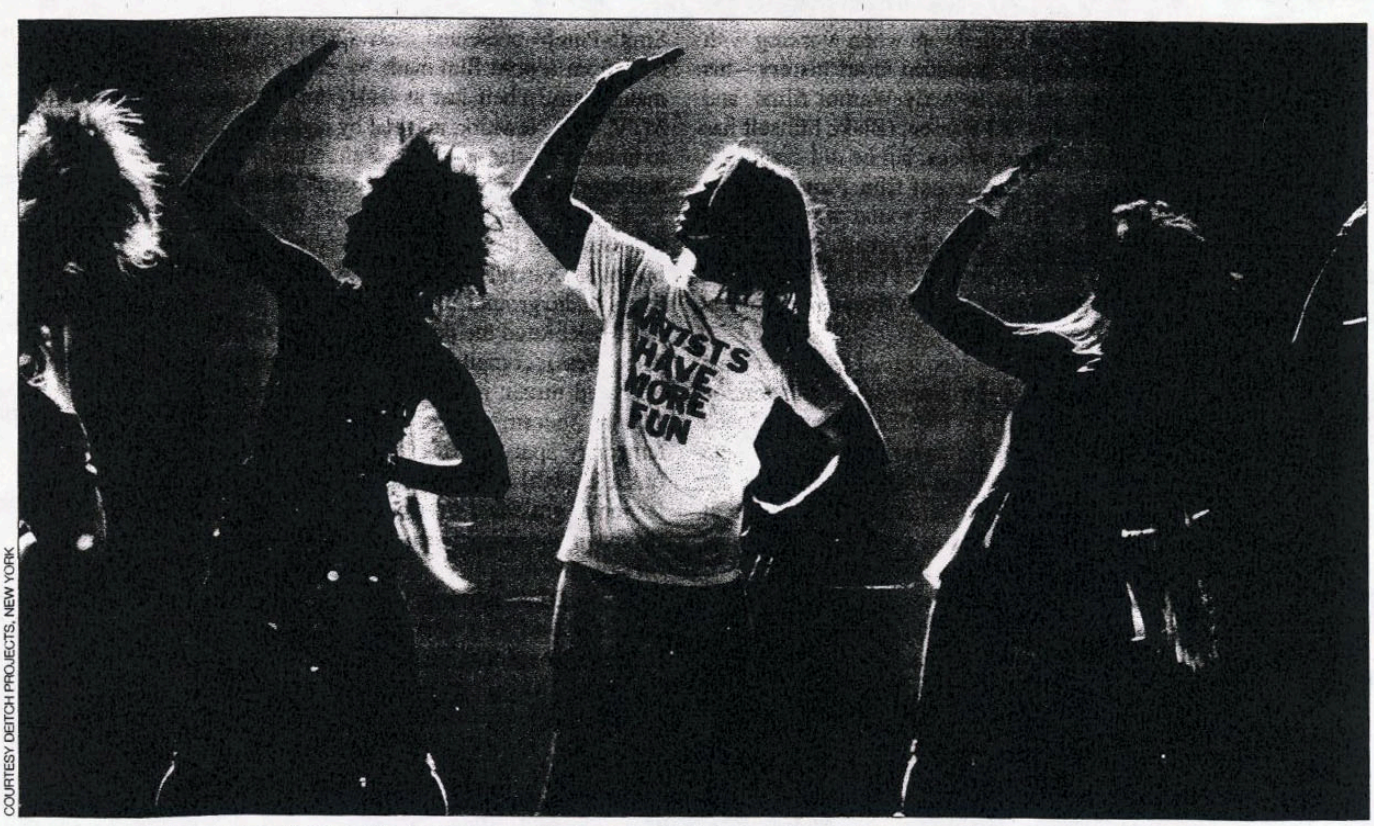
The feeling of nostalgia evidenced in McCormick's comments runs throughout the works featured in "Rock My World," curated by Wattis Institute director Ralph Rugoff. "Rock, like contemporary art, is supposed to be about youth and novelty, but somehow, more and more, rock music is looking back to the past, and the art is looking back as well," says Rugoff. The Beatles, for example, were the source of inspiration for Frances Stark, a 30-year-old California-based artist who shows at CRG in New York. She contributed to Rugoff's exhibition a series of drawings inspired by a time line of the band's career that she found in a press kit for the Beatles biopic *BackBeat*. Using carbon paper to trace the text, which she then cut up and arranged in blocks, Stark created a ghostly rendition of the publicity materials as a savvy comment on the way that fame can endure, even as it fades over time.

Likewise, Rodney Graham created a slide show with a musical soundtrack, titled *Aberdeen* (2000), a pseudo-tribute to the town where the late Kurt Cobain, lead singer of the grunge band Nirvana, was born. (Represented by 303 Gallery, Graham has made music videos of his own as works of art.) While these artists have an acute awareness of the price of rock stardom and the vagaries of fame, they are unabashedly fans as well. Stark has made works of art from letters she has written to rock stars, and both she and Graham have produced CDs of their own original sound stylings.

Fandom may seem diametrically opposed to the kind of critical distance needed to create incisive works of art, but many of these artists manage to balance their own personal relationship to the music with healthy doses of skepticism and humor. Elizabeth Peyton's luscious watercolor portraits of pop stars—Elvis, Cobain, and Sid Vicious—vividly embody the weepy hysteria of fans. Marclay skewered the ritual of Pete Townshend's smashed guitars with his recent video *Guitar Drag*, in which a Fender guitar is tied to the back of an amplifier-equipped pickup truck, and then dragged across dirt roads in rural Texas. His installation of impossible instruments—a 25-foot-long accordion, a 13-foot-tall drum set—presented on a stage as if awaiting a band of equally morphed musicians, sat in the spotlight at this year's Whitney Biennial. Marclay has been combining music, performance, and film for more than two decades, incorporating pop-music references in his artworks similar to the way a previous generation of Pop artists used Hollywood and advertising iconography. One of his earliest works—an installation of shards of broken LPs titled *Reassembled Records* (1984)—is the forerunner of the sculptures now being made by the young Texas artist Dario Robleto.

"I love everything about rock 'n' roll, except the music," says Robleto, 29, a consummate anti-fan who pummeled his mother's Motown collection to create *Some Memories Are So Vivid I Am Suspicious of Them* (2000–1). He made a miniature reproduction of the bedroom his mother had as a teenager, complete with tiny albums and covers of her favorite records, out of the melted vinyl of those very records. "I even made my own LP, which I wrote, recorded, and pressed, only to melt it down as well," says Robleto. "I was really asking, 'How can I be a part of my mother's life through the hysteria of rock 'n' roll?'"

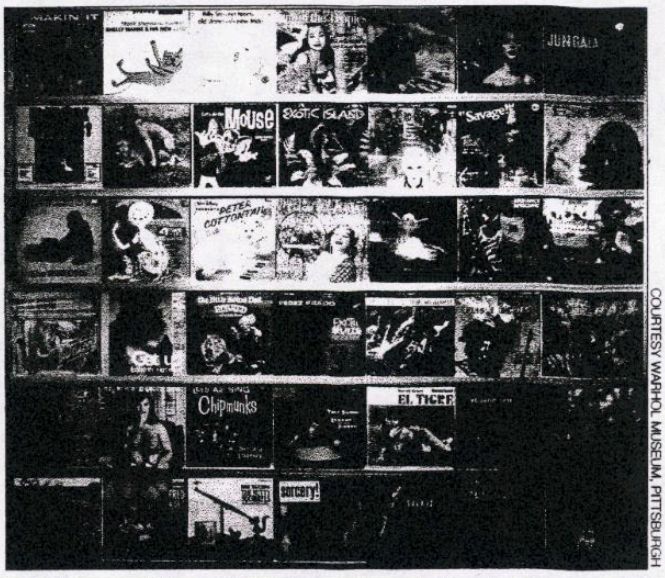
Today, it's not just guitar smashers who become teen idols but also baggy-panted hip-hoppers and laconic DJs. Hip-hop introduced a style of spinning, scratching, and mixing LPs that openly blended, and sometimes undermined, the original performers' intentions. The rise of hip-hop coincided with the synthesized sound of the 1970s that ran through everything from the electronic music of the German band Kraftwerk to the disco anthems of Donna Summer. Once music was being crafted on machines, sampling—taking a noise from one place and transferring it to other beats and sounds—was quick to follow. While



COURTESY DEITCH PROJECTS, NEW YORK

Fischerspooner (with lead singer Casey Fischer in briefs) during its performance at Deitch Projects last spring.

PRIVATE COLLECTION/COURTESY INMAN GALLERY, HOUSTON



COURTESY WARHOL MUSEUM, PITTSBURGH

LEFT Dario Robleto's *Some Memories Are So Vivid I'm Suspicious of Them*, 2000–1. RIGHT Installation shot from the Carlo McCormick–curated "LP Show" at Seattle's Experience Music Project.

rappers and their lyrics took center stage in hip-hop, club music evolved toward techno, a sonic blend of minimalist scores and constant beats that relies on digital clips of sound from a wide range of sources—rock, classical, TV shows, even car horns and police sirens. Whitney curator Lawrence Rinder, who organized this year's biennial, notes that sampling "has become so pervasive with contemporary artists, they apply it to visual forms even without a sound component."

Sampling is a primary influence for Jeremy Blake. Although he acknowledges appropriation has a long history as an artistic strategy, there is, he says, a heightened sense that "artists must rifle through precedent to say something new," adding that "there's an urgency now, a speeding along, that relates to the way that sampling is used in live performance." Blake found this riffing on the past to be particularly apt when working with Beck, a rock star whose roots are grounded in art history—his mother, Bibbe Hansen, performed in Andy Warhol films, and his grandfather was Fluxus artist Al Hansen. (Blake himself has turned down offers to make music videos, but he did create the onscreen artistic interludes in the recent film *Punch-Drunk Love*.) "Beck was looking at his song as sound waves on his computer screen as he listened to it," Blake recalls, "and I was seeing my work in process on the screen as I edited it. You can share a sensibility, and that doesn't have to threaten or undermine your own vision."

Other artists are seizing the music-video format as a direct line to the pop vein. Chris Cunningham, for instance, gained attention at last year's Venice Biennale with an installation that included his 1999 video collaboration with Icelandic singer Björk, and Turner Prize nominee Sam Taylor-Wood featured her video for Elton John's *I Want Love* (2001) in her recent exhibition at Matthew Marks gallery in Chelsea. Aside from the medium of video, these artists are linked to the music world by their appreciation of style as substance, a point mainstream rap and hip-hop—with their hyperbolic glorification of jewelry, cars, furs, and other symbols of wealth—have made into something of a manifesto.

Hip-hop not only refers to DJs and rappers but also to an entire realm of African-American culture that includes graffiti, break-dancing, fashion, jewelry, slang, even body language. The Bronx Museum of the Arts' exhibition "One Planet under a Groove" was a response to "Hip Hop Nation," organized by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland (and shown at the Brooklyn Museum of Art), which featured outfits and albums but little art. "We thought, Why bring this overtly commercial view of hip-hop to the Bronx, the place where it all started?" says Lydia Yee, who cocurated "One Planet" with Franklin Sirmans, explaining why they chose to create their own take. The show encompassed several generations of artists—from David Hammons and Adrian Piper to Gary Simmons, Sanford Biggers, Brett Cook-Dizney, and Chris Ofili. For Yee, hip-hop packs the esthetics of appropriation with a jolt of aggressive attitude.

While many of the artists in this exhibition translate DJ tactics—stealing, copying, blending, and satirizing influences from many sources—to the visual-arts arena, much of the most interesting work came from younger artists, who grew up with hip-hop and are critical of its more commercial aspects. Susan Smith-Pinelo presented *Cake* (2001), a video that juxtaposed clips from a porn film made by rapper Snoop Dogg with more mainstream, albeit just as derogatory, images of women from MTV. Kori Newkirk, inspired by high-school students who tried to imitate rap-star style (using aluminum foil to "cap" their teeth and sporting spray-painted "gold" chains), designed a do-it-yourself kit, *Hip Hop from Home (Faking that Floss)* (2001) that skewered the expensive lifestyles of "gangstas." Two exhibitions at Deitch Projects this fall picked up on nostalgia for hip-hop's underground days. "Yes Yes Y'all—The Birth of Hip Hop" celebrated the publication of a 300-page oral history (Da Capo Press), compiled by Jim Fricke, senior curator at the Seattle-based music museum the Experience Music Project, and Charlie Ahearn, director of the 1982 film *Wild Style*. And at a temporary space in Brooklyn, Deitch presented Janine Gordon (a.k.a Jah-Jah) and her installation "The Art of Hip Hop," a collection of graffitied-over photographs of muscled men from the Brooklyn housing projects.

Early hip-hop, like early rock 'n' roll, encouraged a do-it-yourself (DIY) attitude: all you needed was an electric guitar to start a band, two turntables to become a DJ, or some rhymes and a friend spitting backbeats to be a rapper. Partly in reaction to the music industry trend of packaged acts like Britney Spears and the Backstreet Boys, contemporary artists are forming collectives or musical groups modeled on the style of garage bands. Founded in Detroit in the 1970s by artists Mike Kelley, Jim Shaw, Cary Loren, and lead singer Niagara, Destroy All Monsters Collective targets corporate music as its

enemy. Their paintings—collages of Detroit rockers and local TV personalities—took up two walls in the year's Whitney Biennial. Forcefield, four artists who have worked together in Providence, Rhode Island, since 1995, filled a room in the Whitney with mannequins garbed head to toe in crocheted suits of armor, with glowing-red electric lights for eyes. They seemed to be standing around waiting for the dancing to begin.

Punk and indie attitudes are being revived beyond the confines of the museum as well. Electroclash is an entire movement of DIY types who are seizing on the hyperstylized look of big rock bands while simultaneously revitalizing both the club scene and avant-garde performance art. With bands such as Mount Sims, Le Tigre, WIT, Chicks on Speed, and Peaches—often founded by or including visual artists—the movement is in some ways similar to "art bands" of the 1980s, such as Sonic Youth and Talking Heads. But David Bowie, Debbie Harry, and Duran Duran are the more direct inspirations for the Electroclash esthetic. The movement has spilled over into art galleries, as in a show by Kembra Pfahler (lead singer of the Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black) at American Fine Arts last spring and A.R.E. Weapons' performance at the opening of Kenny Schacter's conTEMPorary gallery in New York this fall.

The ringmaster of Electroclash is record producer Larry Tee, who organizes Berliniamsburg, a weekly concert series at the Luxx, a club in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, every Saturday night. His partner, Conrad Ventur, has been photographing the performers, Richard Avedon–style, over the past two years. "I am shooting legends before they are legends," says Ventur, whose photographs were shown recently at Elizabeth Dee gallery. Emphasizing that Electroclash reinvigorates rock 'n' roll with a spirit of self-invention, he adds, "Let's face it, a DJ doesn't provide much of a stage show, whereas at our events you get sexy girls on stage, sparkly outfits, lights, action, and an energy that makes you feel special just to be there."

When Fischerspooner played to a standing-room-only crowd at Deitch Projects last May, the music took second place to the glam-packed performance. The costumes and set design were both homage to and satire of early MTV, evoking a Kiss meets Pet Shop Boys look. Often the mistakes—missed cues, repeated sound checks, delayed costume changes—were made visible to the audience. "The success of the project is not about seeing how famous Casey can become," explains Fischer, "but to make something unexpected and complicated, to break down and reveal all the devices behind the performances."

Although a huge concert arena like Madison Square Garden may be the ultimate venue for those bands playing the Electroclash circuit, for now Fischerspooner has set its sights on the Venice Biennale. "I have this fantasy about inviting Michael, Madonna, and Britney to the biennale to appear in open caskets, so the public could come and view them," confides Spooner. He admits that while the image of a wake may seem hostile, it does make the point that the stars are, in the end, mere mortals. As his partner, Fischer, explains, "Pop music has become this global religion, a form of royalty, but it's based on things that are actually pretty insignificant and easy to replicate. We want to make rock 'n' roll feel penetrable and accessible again." ■

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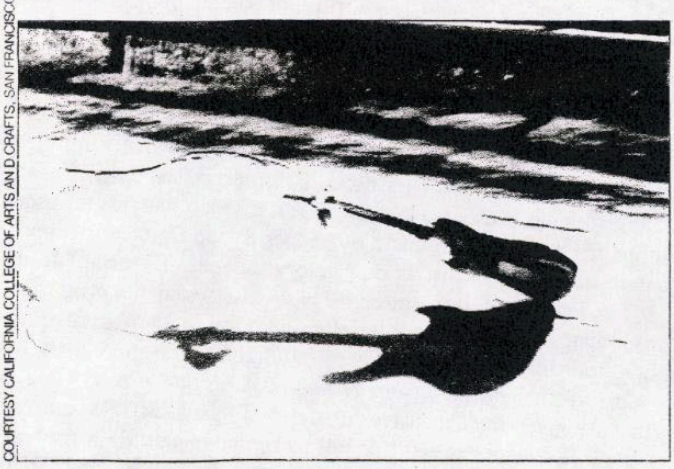
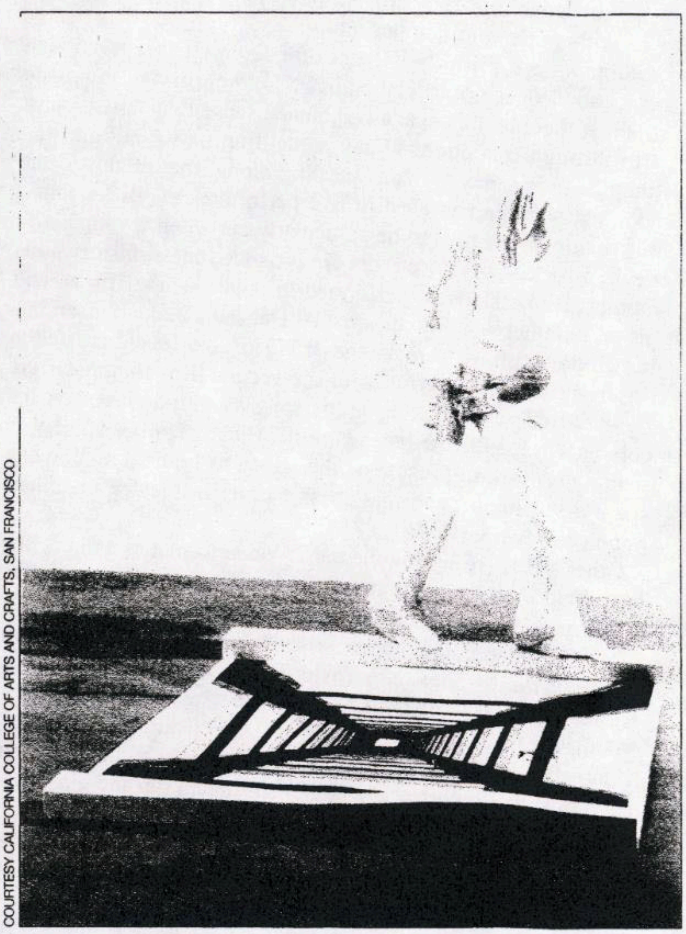


COURTESY CALIFORNIA COLLEGE OF ARTS AND CRAFTS, SAN FRANCISCO

COURTESY WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK



COURTESY CALIFORNIA COLLEGE OF ARTS AND CRAFTS, SAN FRANCISCO

ABOVE LEFT A still from Christian Marclay's video *Guitar Drag*, 2000. BELOW LEFT *Mall Culture*, 2000, the irreverent self-portrait of Destroy All Monsters, shown at this year's Whitney Biennial. RIGHT Evan Holloway's *Left-Handed Guitarist*, 1998, at the Wattis Institute's "Rock My World" show.