Don’t Trust Anyone Over Thirty

Entertainment
by Dan Graham
and Tony Oursler
with Rodney Graham...

Playbill
Edited by Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, Vienna
on the occasion of the presentation at the Wiener Festwochen
and at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden, Berlin

Programmheft
Herausgegeben von Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, Vienna
anlässlich der Präsentation im Rahmen der Wiener Festwochen
und an der Staatsoper Unter den Linden, Berlin
Don't trust anyone over 30.
Francesca von Habsburg

After a conversation with four other private collectors about how they collect and how they perceive their role in the art world, in June 2004 at Art Basel, Sandra Antelos-Suarez, the very charismatic director of TRANS> asked me if I was interested in co-producing a rock-opera with puppets by Dan Graham, Tony Oursler and Rodney Graham. At first the combination sounded so unlikely that I thought she was kidding. It sounded like a top of the pops of art getting together to rework a piece that Dan Graham had conceived for the Monnaie Opera in Brussels under Gerard Mortier in 1987. I had very seriously considered the role that I wanted Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary to play in the art world in the future, and consequently, I was looking for interesting new productions that focus on cross-disciplinary work and transcend the boundaries of traditional art. A collaboration that incorporates rock/punk opera, puppetry, video, and a libretto by Dan Graham was an opportunity not to be missed. Six months later, TRANS> and its co-producers presented the world premiere of Don’t Trust Anyone Over Thirty in Miami, on the occasion of Art Basel Miami Beach 2004 to an overwhelmingly enthusiastic reception and tremendous reviews.

Dan Graham told me something today that is so insightful that I must quote him, because I believe it expresses the essence of this project. “Collaborations are innocent. If they become a power struggle amongst egos they fail.”

The puppets play such an important role in this production, I wondered how their performance developed. When I asked Tony Oursler, he told me that initially he was very skeptical about the puppets because he prefers to leave a lot to the imagination. “The puppets always seem to be too much information and too overwhelming! But what was amazing is that Phillip Huber is such a great puppeteer and worked together with us on these composite characters, which started to become like these touchstones of American pop culture. So when you look at these puppets you start to think: well, that guy looks like Kennedy, or you think that guy looks like Neil Young, or that guy looks like Senator McCarthy, he looks like Jesse Helms, he looks just like one of the puppets! Phillip basically moved into my studio and he became very, very interested in the video’s ability to amplify his moves with the puppets.”
I called Phillip Huber and he told me that working in this sort of collaborations always stretches the artist. "What they do, is they request things from you that are extremely difficult if not impossible. Then in the attempt to realize their desires, you end up stretching yourself as an artist and creating things that you did not even know were possible. This was particularly true with this project when I was working with Tony Oursler on the video that he created. Staging certain video sequences, which I would never have thought of, created a whole different world for me to work in.

In essence I told Tony that this project created a legitimacy for the marionettes as I had never expected, because they allowed me to use them as you would never be able to use a life actor, thus using the strength of the marionettes to the greatest advantage…" David Alexander keeps all that effect and creativity alive with his passionate dedication to the art of puppetry and an unswerving commitment for Don’t Trust Anyone Over Thirty. He takes this responsibility very seriously, and keeps the spirit alive and well in the characters that Phillip, Dan, Sandra and Tony created.

Tony Oursler also worked with Laurent P. Berger to come up with a stage structure that would be like a box with two stages and at the same time acted as a screen for the characters that Phillip, Dan, Sandra and Tony created. This was particularly true with this project when I was working with Laurent P. Berger's and Philippe Dabasse's graphic designs. "Don't Trust Anyone Over Thirty" says Ian Vanek, the drummer in the Band. "We mentioned the ideas from day one, saying 'We have to get Japanether, Paul McCarthy and撅 la vie of the TBA21 team has been magnificent. Daniela Zyman has been particularly instrumental in holding all pieces of this very intricate puzzle together and contributed an excellent article to this catalogue. Her patience and tenacity have created a feeling of stability and professionalism that everyone has great confidence in, especially me! Eva Ebenberger, Philipp Krummel and Barbara Horvath, who stayed up all night helping me transcribe these last minute interviews, are the most fantastic group of people I have ever had the pleasure to work with. I am sure that the whole team of artists and crew will agree with me on that! My heart goes out to Christian Schienerl for his work on this catalogue with Laurent P. Berger's and Philippe Dabasse's graphic design. Thanks so much to Jörg Weisbrodt for having the courage and the faith in me and then we don't know what to do about it. It's a hybrid. All these naive kids, that just arrived here from god knows where, Cookville Tennessee, I think… Then Sandra slowly revealed that people like you and Tim Nye and god knows who else, I mean I know that there are other people involved that I don't even know about, but we really behind the scenes, making this thing come together."

Without Valetin Enrich in Europe, the production would most likely not have another incarnation at all. And the T-B A21 team has been magnificent. Daniela Zyman has been particularly instrumental in holding all pieces of this very intricate puzzle together and contributed an excellent article to this catalogue. Her patience and tenacity have created a feeling of stability and professionalism that everyone has great confidence in, especially me! Eva Ebenberger, Philipp Krummel and Barbara Horvath, who stayed up all night helping me transcribe these last minute interviews, are the most fantastic group of people I have ever had the pleasure to work with. I am sure that the whole team of artists and crew will agree with me on that! My heart goes out to Christian Schienerl for his work on this catalogue with Laurent P. Berger's and Philippe Dabasse's graphic design. Thanks so much to Jörg Weisbrodt for having the courage and the faith in me and then we don't know what to do about it. It's a hybrid. All these naive kids, that just arrived here from god knows where, Cookville Tennessee, I think… Then Sandra slowly revealed that people like you and Tim Nye and god knows who else, I mean I know that there are other people involved that I don't even know about, but we really behind the scenes, making this thing come together."

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Nachdem die Marionetten in dieser Produktion so wesentlich sind, machte ich mir natürlich besonders um sie Gedanken. Tatsächlich gelang es Dan Graham eine gewisse Skepsis ihnen gegenüber zu wecken, da er persönlich es vorzieht, viel mehr der Vorstellungskraft zu überlassen. „Die Marionetten vermitteln sehr gehaltvolle Information; Philip Huber ist ein brillanter Puppenspieler, und entwickelte gemeinsam mit uns diese Kompositioncharaktere, die auf einmal so etwas wie Prüfsteinen amerikanischer Popkultur waren. Da schafft die diese Puppe an und denkt, der Typ erzählt, so wie Kennedy und der Typ sieht aus wie Neil Young und der da wie Senator McCarthy und der wie Jesus Heinz (ein kurzlebiger Senator), der sieht aus wie eine Marionette/ Phillip überstieß quasi in meinen Auen und entwickelte eine gewisse Bewusstlosigkeit in die Puppe, wie seine Bewegungen mit den Puppen durch das Video verändert werden können.“


Tony Oursler arbeitete auch mit dem Set-Designer Laurent P. Berger zusammen; er entwickelte eine homogenartige Räumlichkeit mit mindestens drei Räumen, die gleichzeitig als Projektionsfläche für die Videos fungiert. Das Ganze hat etwas sehr Intimes – das kleine Marionetten in ihrer eigenen Welt... während Tony Videos die Band Japanther, die gleichzeitig auf der Bühne spielt, ebenfalls schrumpfen lässt, bis sie selbst ein wenig wie Poppen aussieht. Bei vier Räumen springt die Aufmerksamkeit des Zuschauers quasi hin und her, da man beide Geschehnisse verfolgen will; kommt jedoch eine dritte Ebene hinzu, ist das eine geht die Ausrichtung der Bühne zu einem Schauspieler einfach nicht mehr möglich; wie und zu ihrer Kraft zum albernen Vorteil zur Geltung bringen.”

David Alexander ist es, der auf dem Stage-Manager Matt Tierney, mit ihren so unterschiedlichen Formen. Dies wurde von allen Beteiligten, ganz besonders von Dan Graham, Tony Oursler und Rodney Graham Interesse hatte. Es wurde von allen Beteiligten, ganz besonders von Dan Graham, Tony Oursler und Rodney Graham Interesse...
gröber Geduld, mit Humor und Mut, oder sagen wir „Glauben“, um diesen Prozess einfach geschehen zu lassen.


Bruce Odland ist ein Meister des Klangs. Ich wollte wissen, wie er es erreicht, so viele unterschiedliche Rhythmen in einem geschlossenen Ganzen zusammenzufügen. Seine poetische Antwort war: „Alle Teile zusammen klingen wie der Ozean, alles lacht zusammen, das läßt nicht auf, es dröhnt so laut, daß die Schranken und Respekt bei der Grenze noch immer stehen.“


Commission and producer
Curator/Artistic director
Sandra Antelo-Suarez

Collaborators
Dan Graham
Tony Oursler
Laurent P. Berger
Japenhar
Rodney Graham

Dan Graham, Tony Oursler, Teresa Seeman
and Sandra Antelo-Suarez
G. Roger Danescu

Phillip Huber from Huber Marionettes & Company
(design, construction and staging)

Michael Carolan, Sarah Frechette, Daniel Luce, Kenneth Berman
Japenhar (Matt Reilly & Ian Vanek)

Co-producers
Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, Vienna
Foundation 20.21, New York
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis
Voices/LAB, New York

World-premiere at Art Basel Miami Beach on December 1st, 2004

Production
Sandra Antelo-Suarez
Miguel Antonio Roca
Kökun Ergun, Manuela Arnaal
Claire Pauley
Valentin Esrich
Matt Tierney
Bruce Oddland
Maria-Paule Macdonald
Carla Soto
Todd Eberle
Eugene Tsai
Usa Schinabeck
Sandra Antelo-Suarez, Claire Pauley and Dan Graham
Sarah Frechette
Joshua Threact
Scarlett Hoarf Graff, Jason Suerco, Jesse Hamernu, Dan Walsh, Matt Dunn, James Oursler, Diene Cohen

Theme song Don’t Trust Anyone Over Thirty
and Fourteen or Fight by Rodney Graham

Rodney Graham
Peter Bourne
Dave Carwell
John Collins
Topanga Canyon in 1968 is the home of hippies, outsiders, and teenagers. Like Neil Sky, the hippies have just moved to the countryside. Neil Sky is a rock musician and with his band, the Sky Tribe, they are some of the hottest hit makers of the day. The entourage consists of twenty-five-year-old Sally-Anna Jiminez, the drummer and tambourine player who was Miss Arizona in 1963, J. S. Bach, a fifteen-year-old whiz kid, who is the band’s keyboard player, manager and accountant, Joey, the bass player, and lastly, Li, the backup singer and astrologer, who chooses the lucky dates for their gigs. These people are not only believers in and practitioners of rock and roll, they are also young, beautiful, and famous.

After a member of Congress invites Neil Sky to a rally to gain support for his efforts to lower the voting age to eighteen (“I say, if someone can die in combat, they can vote”), the young rock star goes on to use his fame and media appeal to mobilize the youth. Indeed, first Neil Sky instigates teenage riots on Sunset Strip and then throughout the nation. Finally, he maneuvers Sally-Anna into the Senate, so that she can be a spearhead for lowering the voting age to fourteen, then he dozes the senators with LSD, and subsequently he becomes the youngest president of the United States of America. Having been elected on a platform of free dope, free love and getting his groove on, his first official act is to relocate all those people who are over thirty years of age to re-education camps, where they are liberally dosed with LSD. (“This is a revolution, man, and you’re either with it or against it. Now which is it?”) But our hero gets his comeuppance when he learns that ageism is a double-edged sword because there is always someone younger, faster and more ruthless. Neil Sky is deposed by his eight year-old adopted son, Dylan, an erstwhile runaway and his crew of friends.

This absurd and slightly melancholic tale of the young, beautiful, and mighty is based on the 1968 film, Wild in the Streets. The clean-shaven and body-beautiful version of the hippie rebel film is a popular arcadian comedy that revisits the trope of youth as America’s greatest weapon in a purely hedonistic society. The denouement of the tragicomic plot is marked by the young heroes’ staging of the “reductio ad absurdum of the hippies’ generational politics.” The film is based on a book by Robert Thom entitled The Day It All Happened, Baby, about the archetypical hippie moment in LA, when the acid got cut with crystal meth, the dreams of peace and love started to curdle, and the Manson Family was waiting in the wings.
Don’t Trust Anyone Over Thirty closely follows the original story by referring to selected dialogues as well as the film’s tone and humor, and its instantly recognizable character types. Still, the theatrical adaptation provides the original with additional layers of meanings, evokes multiple contexts, and speaks to recent developments in both mass culture and fine art. Performed in a mini-theater with a box-like stage structure, reminiscent of an art gallery’s white cube setting, the puppet figurines, which were designed and crafted by puppet master, Phillip Huber, inhabit a tiny space no bigger than 4 by 2 meters. They share their care-fully and sparsely staged habitat with the puppeteers who animate the performance, using cabaret-style puppetry (making the puppeteer visible to the viewer). On the oppo-site end of the stage’s front wall, Ian Vanek and Matt Reilly, the musicians from the Brooklyn-based band, Japanthers, are squeezed in yet another go-go box. Their dark neo-punk rock offers a hint at the commentary on the hippies’ failed ideologies.

Tony Oursler projects larger than life videos on the entire fron white wall that depict some of the most exhilarating and psychedelic scenes from Don’t Trust Anyone Over Thirty. Whether they are the images of young Neil’s first experiments with chemical explosives in his parents home, his sexual encounters with Sally-Anna, the youth rallies, or drooging the senators with LSD, they do not illustrate the work. Instead, the videos are artistic expressions in their own right that determine the visual appearance of the entire rock opera. Through his videos, Oursler successfully brings the puppets to life and shows how these small inanimate objects have something mysterious at heart that is generated by “a subtle relationship between the movements of [the puppeteers’] fingers and the movements of the puppets attached to them, something like the relationship between numbers and their logarithms or between asymptote and hyperbola.”

Oursler’s videos also produce a unifying visual connection between the narrative sequences on the puppet stage and the inter-cepted live music of the Japanthers. Nevertheless, there is a unique dramaturgical effect created by the rapid move-ment between the attention focused on the puppets, the videos and the live music. The various genres exercised in the puppet theater, video projection and musical theater are intertwined in such a way that they create “extensions” between creative categories and schizophrenic displacements. The montage of puppets and puppeteers as well as the constant shifts in medium and scale reinforce a Brechtian sensibility that tries to reveal, rather than obscure the mechanisms of “live” “productions.”

Not only is Don’t Trust Anyone Over Thirty a self-consciously structured theatrical work that allows Dan Graham’s original concept to unfold, it is also the product of a team of artists whose individual contributions coalesce in the shared project. It examines the awareness of the arts’ increasingly complicated relationship to popular enter-tainment as well as the questions concerning the social models associated with making art. Graham and his friends, however, do not understand entertainment as a grand spectacle. Instead, Don’t Trust Anyone Over Thirty pursues an intimate path that affords oblique and humorous viewers of mainstream America, whereby humor is used to inspire further consideration and reconsideration. Their work is informed by an acute interest in their audience and its respective demographics in order to reveal social values and conventions and subtly disrupt the expectations of their “taste” by introducing worn out motifs and genres, often (and most satisfyingly) with an embarrassing effect.

At the same time, Don’t Trust Anyone Over Thirty also reconstructs history through a revelation of elements and fragments of the past. Here, Graham acts as the informed
extends beyond the stage and into the audience area. multi-media installation of puppetry and off-off theater that piece's stage designer, has successfully designed a hybrid ironically, strong anti-hippie attitudes. Laurent Berger, the anarchic neo-punk style is suffused with subversion, and, concealingly: 

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"For those of us who are now long past the age of thirty, the age at which you became 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. The rock opera is the perfect form for such an exploration: it was born kitch, and signaled the death of the delusion that rock music was inherently a 'revolutionary' form."

Mike Atkey

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2. Heinrich von Kleist, Don’t Trust Anyone Over Thirty
3.  Dan Graham, My Religion (1965-1990), Writings and art project
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Tony Oursler bespielt die weiße Frontwand mit überlebensgroßen Videos, darunter einige der anregendsten und psychedelischsten Szenen aus Don’t Trust Anyone Over Thirty. Die ersten Experimente des jungen Neil mit Sprengstoffen im elterlichen Heim, seine sexuellen Begegnungen mit Sally-Anna, die wilden Aufmärsche der Jugendlichen oder die Szene, in der den Senatoren LSD verabreicht wird, verstehen sich nicht als Illustration der Bühnenarbeit, sondern stellen eine eigenständige künstlerische Äußerung dar und prägen die visuelle Gestaltung der gesamten Rockoper. In seinen Videos erfüllt Oursler die Puppen mit Leben und zeigt, dass diese kleinen unbelebten Wesen ein inneres Mysterium besitzen. Dies erinnert an die Beschreibungen von Heinrich von Kleist zum Puppenspiel: Es verhalten sich die “Bewegungen seiner Finger (des Puppenspielers) zur Bewegung der daran befestigten Puppen ziemlich künstlich, etwa wie Zahlen zu ihren Logarithmen oder die Asymptote zur Hyperbel”


Don’t Trust Anyone Over Thirty ist nicht nur eine bewusst strukturierte Theaterarbeit, in der sich Dan Graham ursprünglichen Konzept, das es 1987 gemeinsam mit Marie-Paule Macdonald entwickelte, entfalten kann, es ist auch...
Don't Trust Anyone Over Thirty verfolgt einen subtilen Weg, der schwere und humorvolle Blicke auf Mainstream America bietet, wobei Humor als Katalysator verwendet wird, der weitergehende Überlegungen und Reflexionen auslösen soll. Eingeflossen in die Arbeit ist auch das Interesse der Künstler an ihrem Publikum und seiner demografischen Zusammensetzung, um gesellschaftliche Werte und Konventionen hinführend und Erwartungen subtil zu konservieren, indem sie schal gewordene Motive und Genese einführt, was oft peinliche (und höchst lösende) Effekte auslöst.


