Sonic Youth etc: Sensational Fix

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REFERENCES

Sonic Youth etc. : sensational fix, Saint-Nazaire : LiFE ; Bolzano : Museion ; Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2008

- 1 This catalogue “draws from”, “relays” and “extends” the exhibition project devoted to Sonic Youth and jointly organized by the LiFE (Saint-Nazaire) and the Museion Bolzano (Italy). After being shown at Saint-Nazaire from 18 June to 7 September 2008, the project went to the Düsseldorf Kunsthalle and the one in Malmö.
- 2 The catalogue stands out right away for two qualities: its format and its volume. The former adopts the dimensions of a 45 rpm disk (in fact two 45 rpm disks are slipped inside the book, on which are four pieces composed by each of the group members). The latter attests to an impressive task of collection and documentation, which has made it possible to group together various heterogeneous elements: “official” and “amateur” photographs of the group and other people mostly belonging to the cultural circles of music and contemporary art; notebooks, writings, interviews, album covers, works of art, and so on. In addition to these documents, the catalogue also encompasses critical essays and four new interviews conducted in 2008 by Christophe Wavelet and Paul Sztulman with the four group members (in French and English, like all the other writings in the volume).
- 3 This outstanding task of collecting written and visual documents and this formal research (Roland Groenenboom designed the catalogue, Estela Robles its graphics) fail to dodge one pitfall: the non-hierarchic decision that governs the classification of the different elements brought together does not enable them to form an archive: private photographs, scribbles, notes jotted on bits of paper, and logbooks all, in the end of the day, help to construct an image of the group as a fetish subject, in such a way that you sometimes have the feeling of looking at an enormous fan book. Many of the exegetic

and critical writings accompanying these documents will not contradict this basic ambiguity, even if they shift it onto another level.

- 4 A general thesis is in fact set forth in the very first pages of the catalogue, in a text jointly written by the four editors associated with this publication (Corinne Diserens, Christophe Wavelet, Ulrike Groos and Jakob Fabricius: “Almost three decades have singled out what emerged from the early days of this group’s activities: the musicians forming it are part of a history—the history of dialogue in the arts—that is coupled with politics—politics of equality in collective experimentation.” Needless to add, the Sonic Youth group had and still has links with the art world, as is shown by their many projects and collaborations. But how does the shift occur from this state of affairs to the model of an aesthetics and a politics that is doubly egalitarian—between the arts and between individuals? The question is there. While it is important to study more closely the various activities, carefully analyze the ingredients of a complex history, and ask ourselves what “dialogue” and “experimentation” cover, in concrete terms, to appraise their forms, this thesis, in the end, acts as a shield: for it over-defines all signs as proof of a general meaning (of dialogue, of experimentation, of figures of equality).
- 5 So the dialogue between the arts (and also between the East and West coasts of the United States) can be presented in the form of physical reconciliations and friendships between people, collaborative efforts (the album covers by Raymond Pettibon and Mike Kelley, for example) and connections which, for the most part, espouse two major tracks: Dan Graham for the plastic arts—Kim Gordon was a student of his, and Graham is still friendly with the group—and Glenn Branca—Thurston Moore, Lee Ranaldo and Kim Gordon were all once musicians in his band. So collective experimentation can end up as an oft-repeated formula in the book: this group has no leader and refuses to have one; all decision-making processes are democratic.
- 6 If these links and these figures are not closely looked at, the thesis can then lump everything together as it proceeds, and give minor events and anecdotes the status of major ordeals. In so doing, the catalogue fails to avoid the shortcomings peculiar to any hermeneutic undertaking. Its editing is implicitly based on a little discussed equivalence between music and signs, conveyed by words and sounds—an equivalence that operates, incidentally, within all Pop music, whatever its genre or nature, and is peculiar neither to Sonic Youth nor to rock. Within this logic, it is, needless to say, possible to identify different sounds and signs, detect alternative categories and classes, and with Sonic Youth associative forms of rock music and the (scholarly) signs of art. This in no way thwarts this logic, and will scarcely permit any escape from a Mannerist chord, wherein rock has always developed (powerfully, postures, attitudes, styles, acts and ideas).
- 7 It would be necessary to undo this interplay of sounds and signs and test it on the anvil of a second hypothesis, in order to appreciate how a more materialist politics of sounds is achieved. “From this viewpoint, as is suggested by the English theoretician Jeremy Gilbert, the politics of music must not be considered on the basis of the words of songs, the slogans on album covers and the community affiliations that an artist may claim or give rise to, but on the basis of the formal character of music as perceived in the intermingling of cultural contexts and in particular in the physical experiences they permit or disallow their potential audiences”. Out of many writings, only the essay by Paul Sztulman and Christophe Wavelet, “Sonic Youth, de ce côté-ci de l’Atlantique” tries to put this hypothesis into perspective.