



Rodgers & Hart, "Smash Song Hits."
Richard Rodgers and the Imperial Orchestra. Columbia Records, 1940.
Design by Alex Steinweiss.



PEACE, LOVE AND ROCKETS

By Felipe Mujica

Some history: interests and reasons to do a show about music records

It is ironic that what we broadly call DIY music culture has a lot to do with the history of mainstream music: in 1938, at age 23, Alex Steinweiss (who was freelancing for Columbia Records) came up with the idea to replace the dull and heavy brown craft paper covers of the 78rpm records with a designed and colored cover. This invention was also a response to a new format: the 33rpm record. The creation and development of a visual aspect of the record hugely boosted sales and basically revolutionized the record business. Steve Lafreniere explains: "First was *Smash Song Hits* by Rodgers and Hart, for which Steinweiss created a collage of Broadway marquees floating over a red and black spiral. Sales spiked on *Smash Song Hits*, and soon enough, faux-surreal album covers were de rigueur. Every big label cleared space for an art department, and the rest, as they say, is *Dark Side of the Moon*."¹ Looking online at a group of those first records, one sees a range of graphic styles and thematic influences that - from an art history point of view - create an upbeat mix between Modernism and Surrealism (possibly resulting in an early Pop Art) - and from a design point of view - is probably one of the first visual responses to the recently born mass media. After this first period came a long and very productive time of music cover designs which influenced generations of young people around the world (in which I count myself and I think also all the participants of this project). What an impact was Pink Floyd's *The Wall* cover! Or the sensation of having the just-released *Thriller* record of Michael Jackson in your hands... looking back to that moment, that feeling was also about the object, the photograph, the printed lyrics, the date and place of the pressing. Music - composed now by a sound and a visual aspect - had become a form of globalized cultural identity. Growing up in Chile, one could be a fan of New Order or Depeche Mode. Growing up in Russia, one could be a fan of Bob Dylan or Johnny Cash. Growing up in Poland, one could be a fan of Public Enemy.

In today's technologically-driven world, music has become one more of the several immaterial elements that surround us, that define us. We believe that MP3s and their infinite economy and abstraction are positive signs of progress, together with e-books, role-play games in virtual worlds, social networking tools and platforms. This is causing a specific and new situation. MP3s make music much more accessible, yet for that reason, I think, less fundamental. Young people (those young people) download legally and illegally with an easiness and frequency that transform the file, the song, into an invisible mini-gadget... What is important now is the song - the "hit" - not the album. If you buy the song following the rules on iTunes, the song comes with a small JPG of the album cover but in general, the traditional concept of the album - or its purpose - has disintegrated, or at least changed into something different. This new trend is making each song, or "hit", less attached to a narrative, or at least to that kind of narrative we associate with the construction of an album (a special mood, energy or group of ideas). This should be the moment to accept that the opposite, what this exhibition is about, falls into a nostalgic and probably more conservative way of understanding media. We are looking into the obsolete (vinyl and - why not? - CDs as well), searching for the leftovers, the bones and pieces of a specific moment of popular culture. Nobody remembers - at least I don't - an album by Lady Gaga, yet we all know her "hits" and we can even hum them. They invade us, get us even if we don't want them or refuse them. Her songs build a context and narrative beyond the album, her narrative is post-album, which in a sense is a development, over Madonna. The ways we receive media and use it have changed and that is OK. What this show is really about is about an alternative way of doing things.

But maybe MP3s are not as guilty as we may think. A couple of years ago I watched an '80s B-movie about three teenagers living in the Bronx. They had problems, were surrounded by street gangs and drug dealers. A hard life was out there and at home things weren't easy either, with nowhere to go except club parties with great DJ contests. One of the main characters is an aspiring DJ, he participates in the contest but I can't remember if he wins or not. I do remember the scratching/sam-



pling battles - where music became pieces of a magazine ripped by a kid that for some reason loved to make angry collages - they vividly showed how abstract and fragmented music had become. A song was not a song, a sound was not a sound, it was all a mix and nothing like it used to be, even the beat (THE BEAT) was cut. The recognition and fame depended on how fast and how virtuosically the DJ "sliced it up." Remembering this movie made me think how DJ culture has pushed music into a new territory, one where authorship has been put into question and where the final product is not a traditional album or a collection of songs. On the contrary; it is about the reuse, recycling and appropriation of what has already been done. Could we have here a starting point of the album's disappearing act?

Following this idea, I would like to mention the techno genre. Besides, I have always been fascinated by how music relates to its context. For this reason I think it is really important to visit at least once the city of Detroit to understand why and how the Detroit techno scene developed until it became a worldwide movement. Probably and tragically one of the most forgotten cities in the US, the years of emptiness the city felt from the 1960s on left large amounts of empty spaces, both residential and industrial (a city of four million habitants was drastically reduced to 1 million habitants in a short period of time). Regardless of the criticism one could have towards the influence of the federal government on the de-habitation of a city like Detroit since the end of World War II, within its new empty buildings and lots the local and emerging techno scene found the space and isolation it needed to grow and define itself as a unique, worldwide musical movement. And not only the unused space, but the surrounding automobile industry was influential too: The definition of "Detroit Techno" on popular open-source information website Wikipedia describes the history as follows: "Detroit techno music was originally thought of as a subset to Chicago's early style of house [music]. However, some critics believe that the Detroit techno movement was an adjunct to house music, named for the new style of music played at a Chicago nightclub called The Warehouse. Although producers in both cities used the same hardware and even collaborated on projects and remixes together, Detroiters traded the choir-friendly vocals of house for metallic clicks, robotic voices and repetitive hooks reminiscent of an automobile assembly line. Many of the early techno tracks had futuristic or robotic themes..." Maybe here the album as an object was not as important, yet it was still part of an underground movement that functioned as a reaction to an established and decaying environment. The album, probably more as a concept, was a means to promote and expand a social movement with a pre-established set of goals, a way to enjoy and live radically within the city.

Another place, another time: while I was studying art in Santiago de Chile in the mid '90s a strange and heterogeneous group of friends (composed of engineering, design and art students) united to create Pixiemia, which as the name suggests was a Pixies-exclusive cover and homage band. It was larger than the real band, about double in size, I guess because of the enthusiasm the whole idea generated. It was probably also a big idea due to the newly imported notion of "alternative music" that was so in trend in those days. The band had a couple of rehearsals and soon was ready for its university debut. As I was not a musician, nor a singer, I could only collaborate by designing the posters and some other minor merchandise elements. Here we also used appropriation in all its extension; I would photocopy imagery from the Pixies albums and customize them our way. Cutting letters from magazines I would create signage and text blocks over the found images using lo-fi tools: X-acto knives, glue and tape. The original design would later be photocopied and distributed throughout different campuses. Although the band was nervous as many of the participants barely had stage experience, the first concert was a huge success. The melodic songs were melodic and the raw guttural screams from Black Francis were doubly raw and guttural. The guitar riffs and solos were excellent too, also the bass and drums (at least this is the way I remember it). Following this concert came a short period of inner-circle success. Pixiemia was asked to play at two more university parties with a potentially huge amount of spectators. It was time for more pirate poster production (I wish I could find these originals). Around the same time, together with my best art school friend we would copy any available alternative music tape and proceeded to re-design a new cover for the newly pirated tape. We used found imagery and letter sets from cheap glossy magazines to create unique collages. Here, at age 19, I learned to enjoy the slow process of designing my own tape cover, the very best ones even had the song list made out of letter magazine cuts.



Image of Detroit, found on the internet (no credit of ownership)



Todd Sines, "The World of Detroit Techno 1991-2005" Photojournal



Pixies, "Debaser" (live single)
4AD Records, 1997



Jumping forward to the present and consumer-friendly times, the newest iPhone has an app that allows the device to recognize a song just by placing your iPhone next to a speaker. By pressing a button, you can know the artist, the album and the title of the song and in extension - as if a magic trick - you can buy it on iTunes. The whole process takes maybe 20 seconds. Sound-wise and also as exchange value it seems that music has become as abstract as it could ever be. It has become a fast consuming product that will elevate or at least transport the listener. On the other hand, there is always an alternative to the mainstream, and this is what this project is about. Peace, Love and Rockets intends to look (with nostalgia) into that music world that keeps printing and designing its covers and posters, its booklets and maybe a magazine that comes with it. A place where printed matter and sound join forces again, a place where there is a final object to hold onto, to move around and open up, to share, to be amused by. Something that accompanies music and makes it something richer, something to take care of, something that is actually responding to its context and not just strolling along with it and becoming its sedative, sometimes in a subtle way and sometimes directly critical.

The process, the show, the installation

As collaborators of this exhibition I invited Keegan Cooke from New York, Andreas Diefenbach from Frankfurt, Claudio Fernández from Santiago de Chile and Yan Jun with Ruan Qianrui from Beijing. They each represent a different city and continent and therefore each one also represents a different context. Each of them has a keen and deep knowledge of music history and most of the records and other artifacts in the show were selected by them. I have worked mostly as a mediator between the general concept of the show, The Center for Book Arts' needs and program and finally as a moderator between the collaborators.

Keegan Cooke is a New York based artist, musician and a member of the band Crystal Stilts. His selection is mainly divided in two parts: a local and contemporary selection from New York, predominantly editions from the Sacred Bones record label, and a beautiful record selection of albums from British 70s DIY punk bands that include Move, Disco Zombies, Milk From Cheltenham and the Tronics, among others.

Andreas Diefenbach is a German artist with a long history in the Frankfurt 90s' electronic and dance scene. His selection is based on European independent labels that specialize in small editions of well-crafted records of electronic and experimental music. Labels included are Feld, Deafstar, Doumen, Ultraeczema, STADL (Frankfurt Städtisches Kunstinstitut) and DE PLAYER/Peter Fengler.

Claudio Fernández is a Chilean musician and audio-visual artist who was part of the 90s' noise/punk band Supersordo. His record selection is also divided in two parts. One part features a selection of heavy metal bands from Europe, Central America and the US, all of which contain highly political and anti-establishment stances. Examples include Guaranteed Kratch, House Arrest, Die Human Race, Los Crudos and Tortura Auditiva. In the second part, Claudio has selected a group of very lo-fi homemade CDs from Chilean rock, experimental, and hip hop bands and sound artists, most of which were produced in the 1990s and 2000s.

Yan Jun and Ruan Qianrui are both based in Beijing and they have collaborated for many years through the Sub Jam label, which was funded by Yan Jun in 1998 (Ruan has designed many of Sub Jam's releases). Together they have selected about 12 CDs of Chinese experimental sound music and also a collection of ink-jet printed posters. These were originally designed and conceived to promote the label, bands and events, but also functioned as active elements of the spatial setting of the music/sound event. The posters were hung above the musicians, wrinkled over tables, placed on the floor, etc. As a way to try to bring back this experimental/musical setting, a group of posters will be strategically installed in the gallery space of The Center for Book Arts.



In between the main selection I also proposed including some records from my personal collection and requested loans from friends and labels. Some of my additions to the show include the invitation to the New York based label RVNG Intl. (which is showing carefully crafted records by Bronze, Pink Skull, In Flagranti, CFCF, and Exceptor) and other projects such as the Brooklyn based duo Bow Ribbons, Mexican art band Lasser Moderna, German Heavy Metal art band Se Golden Thorsten and finally the legendary Chilean a la Krautrock band Maestro with its spinoffs by Joe Villablanca (Toni, Lado B and Compañeros del Colegio) and the new Chilean a la Krautrock band Föllakzoid.

All together the exhibition contains six sections:

- 1- Chilean and Latin American Lo-Fi Self Produced Rock, Electronic and Experimental
- 2- International Hardcore, Death Metal and Punk
- 3- Chinese Rock, Noise and Experimental
- 4- European Electronic and Experimental
- 5- US current Alternative Rock and Independent Labels
- 6- British DIY 1970s Punk

As you will see through this catalogue and also throughout the exhibition, each section and group of records functions in a specific way in accordance to its context. In Chile, homemade and very lo-fi CDs are the main way of getting material released, due to an almost complete lack of independent labels, magazines and venues. Whatever underground or independent music movement happened during and post dictatorship years of the 1990s was rapidly assimilated and transformed into mainstream by the comfortableness of the comparatively more stable and strong economy of the 2000s. In Europe and the United States, nostalgia for the object remembered from childhood has brought back the release of vinyl records and even tape cassettes by local bands and small independent labels. Even though many bands and labels make a strong use of the online promotional tools such as Myspace and MP3 downloads, the dedication to the production of a tangible object has opened doors to a new wave of cover design. For the Chinese participants, music has a strong political connotation. Although their music is not political, their way of life - within an almost autonomous and parallel micro-economy and micro-culture - can be seen as a form of resistance to the power structures that dominate their daily life.

These sections were created organically as a response to the selections made by each collaborator. Two of the participants proposed music selections that were out of their supposed geographic area of interest, which in a way shows how in music locality is both a system of representation and also a loose gray area of production that is - and should be - open to other localities. Each section is shown independently and the order above is also the order of the sections in the gallery space (the sections in this catalog have been organized in this same order). Also, at the center of the exhibition space a sound table was set up with six CD players, one for each section.

The exhibition design of Peace, Love and Rockets - the walls covered with corrugated cardboard panels - was decided as a way to maintain a workspace aesthetic, a temporary and - why not? - punk feeling, as well as one that would also allow the installation process to productively open, as its structure permitted relatively easy changes of placement positioning. To attach the records directly to the walls or to have them displayed in glass cases would have made them be - and exist - in a situation too close to art, too close to an art piece. This in progress and povera state relates conceptually and materially to the origins of all the music productions contained in the exhibition, to the general DIY mood of it. It is very important to keep honest to the spirit of what one is working on, looking at, showing and sharing.



The selected pieces...

As this show is essentially about the encounter between music and art, I would like to define three generalizing categories of artist/musicians and the subtle differences between them. The first category consists of bands and musicians that approach the visualization of their output such as concert performances and displays, dress style, record, publications, etc., as a real compliment to their sound work. An example is the cult band Devo, which had a strong aesthetic proposition even though it can be considered in the borderline between the alternative and the mainstream. The second category are artists that have musical projects which function as extension of their artwork or sometimes become their artwork. This group generally tends to function from an ironic perspective towards rock music and all its cultural implications. Exemplifying this group is The Poetics, created by Mike Kelly and Tony Oursler during their study years at Cal Arts, and the musical projects by Martin Kippenberger made sometimes in collaboration with Albert Oehlen. The third category includes musician/artists that work with sound experimentation which one could say have a more formal approach that ties the musical experience to sensorial and phenomenological issues that evolved from the conceptual and trans media work experimented from the 60s onwards. Branden W. Joseph explains: "It was the core group of Young, Zazeela, Conrad, and Cale and the wall of sound that they created that formed the aesthetic touchstone to which Conrad's Early Minimalism returned. Contemporary performances by Conrad are still notable for their high volume and room filling effect, the establishment of standing sound waves that seemingly solidify the space about the listener, creating an auditorily pressure-filled environment in which the entire body is implicated. Bearing down on the amplified strings, Conrad at his most effective virtually melds with his instrument, effacing the distinction between the means of sound production and its amplified diffusion, playing the speakers as much as the violin."²

This project is less about artists that make music and instead focuses more on musicians, bands and labels that - still from a critical and autonomous point of view - just make music. A few instances of artists/bands with experimental approaches can be seen, such as most of the work contributed from Beijing (which can be read against the history of the '60s and '70s as mentioned above) yet in general this exhibition leans towards the first category. Although there are fine lines that divided or semi-integrate these different approaches, it is probably safe to say that the participants of this project really believe in music. Their belief is a strategy that on the one hand is in tune with the mainstream understanding of the role and function of music and, on the other hand, is in tune with an artistic understanding towards the production and circulation of the final product. In this sense the project is about looking into a possible shared strategy, a reflection about the album as an extension of the art book in a "non-artistic" way.

Finally, all the records and CDs included in this project have been selected because they represent a minor gesture. They all constitute small fights, fights almost lost from the beginning that are important as acts of contrast, as acts of defiance. During the opening of the exhibition a conservation student asked me, within the context of the records included in the exhibit as musical examples of book art, if I saw the book art movement as the next big thing in art. This question seemed to me at first naïve, but it made me seriously think about what was the importance of the book art and, while standing in the middle of the exhibition, of the album. I told her that probably not, that as individual pieces, albums or artist books, even made with the most care and creativity, were still minor gestures compared to a high art piece at the MOMA, for example, like the large scale "Water Lilies" (1914-26) by Claude Monet, impactful by both scale and by its resonance with the general public. I also told her that the strength of the album or that of the artist book was in their collectiveness. If you add and add, gather and gather, then each place or city or school forms a group of works, which later unite thematically or formally to another group of works, and so on. Their great importance then is in the potential of their unity, their connectivity; they are fragments of a much larger and complicated gesture.

1- Lafreniere, Steve. "The LP Show" - Design - exhibition of album cover art, Artforum, Summer 2002

2- Joseph, Branden W. "Beyond the Dream Syndicate, Tony Conrad and the Arts after Cage", page 35, Zone Books, New York.



Leo Coomans, "Basement Recordings - 1978-1982 Lp"
Ultraeczema Records, 2009
12" vinyl, edition of 300



Devo band in Devo outfit, circa 1980

















