Mixtapes: Popular Music in Contemporary Art  
Lewis Glucksman Gallery, Cork  
Rachel Warriner

Rock’s creed is fun. Fun forms the basis of its apocalyptic protest.

Dan Graham, Rock My Religion

Walking up the stairs of Cork’s architecturally stunning but certainly not rock and roll Lewis Glucksman Gallery, you are met by Marc Bijl’s Teenage Kicks, (2003) a gloriously aesthetised drum kit that is adorned with deep red and black artificial roses, candle light bulbs surrounded by dripped wax, a plaster cast skull, and spray painted text saying ‘Live Fast Die Young’ spewed onto the wall behind it. This play with the visual clichés of rock music provides the perfect frame to this extensive consideration of the relationship between the visual arts and pop music. The artists whose work is represented in the Mixtapes exhibition explore the relationship of pop music to its fans not by examining the music, but instead by exploring the varied accessories and associations that surround that spectacular industry. Music is at best a sideline, to paraphrase Matt Packer, the co-curator of the show, for an exhibition about music; it’s quite a quiet experience.

There are various strands that run throughout the exhibition. Certain artists included explore the sociocultural aspects of pop music’s relationship to society. Dan Graham’s video essay Rock My Religion (1982-4) explores the spiritual connections between the early use of music by religious groups, most notably the Shakers, and the later explosion of the rock, hippy and punk music scenes. The moment where footage of religious frenzy is combined with Sonic Youth’s Shaking Hell creates a persuasive image of a spiritual experience through music. Alejandro Cesarco’s The Ramones (an autobiography) (2008) consists of a black background with the titles of every Ramones song that begins with the word ‘I’ printed on it in white. The piece creates an odd conversation with the viewer; the repetition of the word ‘you’ making the listener-viewer into a confidant, the object of both affection and repulsion. In focusing attention on the turgid phrases that are used in naming songs, Cesarco highlights the overwrought emotions that are so often assumed by the rock industry. Mika Tajima/ New Human’s 2008 collaboration, Holding Your Breath (Taking the Long Way) references Jean-Luc Godard’s Sympathy for the Devil by using a similar recording studio environment in which performers Tajima, C. Spencer Yeh, and Vito Acconci improvise a distorted and affecting soundscape. This video serves as a sort of hybrid music video, both a consideration of how the music is viewed and as documentation of an original performance. It raises questions about the relationship between performance and documentation, particularly through the direct reference to the Rolling Stones in the context of the mass media and the glorification of music and musicians.

This exploration of the way in which music is venerated is another theme that runs throughout the exhibition. Bettina Pousttchi’s Fans (2002) examines the collective experience of the ‘event’ of pop music, with faceless fans gathering in anticipation of a Robbie Williams concert, football style shirts showing their support for just another spectacle. Anne Collier’s Anything You Want (Black) (2006) and Crying (2005) encourage sustained looking at the visual adornment of music, the close-up images of a tearful eye in the former and a beautiful tear-stained face in the latter are both visually arresting and ostentatious. Fergus Feehily’s Lilac (for Grant Hart) and Lilac #2 (both 2007) are a more personal take on fandom that represents a third thread in the exhibition. His carefully paperwrapped Hüsker Dü album covers are illustrated with delicate flowers and then carefully encased in glass and wood, changing them from mass cultural items into precious objects reflecting their importance to the dedicated fan. However, it is perhaps David Lamelas’s Rock Star (character appropriation) series that informs most compellingly on this exhibition. The photographs comprising the first part, created in 1974 and shown on the lower floor of the gallery, were shot in black and white; light, movement and pose all reflecting the image of a genuine rock star in concert, implying virility, excitement and passion. The second series on the upper floor from 2008 were shot in colour; instead of the young, virile poses of the first set of photographs, they show an aging rocker who has slipped into cliché, no longer idolized, but instead outmoded and ridiculous.

It is the absence of the presentness of music that figures most strongly in this exhibition. Despite the distinctive approaches taken by the artists to representing and responding to the world of pop music, they are linked by a sense of failure: the vibrancy of the pop scenes that they attempt to pin down is transient, and the objects that endeavour to preserve it sadly echo this loss. Viewing
Mixtapes is both an entertaining and a pensive experience, the stillness of the objects and the gallery never match the vibrancy of the subject that they are exploring. Most prominent is the mismatch between the sought after spiritual experience that Graham describes and the attempt to control, document and represent it; the impossibility of adequate response to something felt so deeply by its fans is made sorely apparent. The exhibition questions both the way in which we are asked to exalt popular music and the hyperbolic claims that are made for the industry. The quietness of the exhibition, therefore, is poignant and apt; what we are examining here is not music, but instead our inevitable separation from the apocalyptic fun that Graham describes.

Having recently completed the MA in Modern and Contemporary Art History at UCC, Rachel Warriner will be starting her PhD on the work of Mary Kelly and Nancy Spero in January. Mixtapes was on view at the Lewis Glucksman Gallery, 8 June - 24 October 2010.