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ART

It's Only Rock and Art, but They Like It

By DOROTHY SPEARS

THE strobe lights flicker hypnotically and the dancers move robotically when the haunting face of the chanteuse Nico appears in "Exploding Plastic Inevitable," the 1966 road show of art, music and film organized by Andy Warhol. Amid the Velvet Underground's droning guitars, Lou Reed's voice emerges in all its steely grit.

Mr. Reed may have been among the first rock 'n' roll stars to embrace art and film as inspiration. But he is certainly not the last, as "Sympathy for the Devil: Art and Rock and Roll Since 1967," a highly anticipated exhibition opening this weekend at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, clearly demonstrates.

Taking as its departure point Ronald Nameth's film "Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable" and Mr. Warhol's videotaped "Screen Tests" of Velvet Underground members — and taking as its title the 1968 [Rolling Stones](#) anthem — this survey presents more than 100 paintings, drawings, videos, films and sound installations that demonstrate the irreverent entanglements among artists and rockers.

Among the highlights are Dan Graham's 55-minute video "Rock My Religion" (1982-84); album covers and fliers drawn by Raymond Pettibon for his brother Greg Ginn's band Black Flag; Jutta Koether's 2006 multimedia installation "Music"; Aida Ruilova's 58-second video from 2002 based on the final scene in [Jean-Luc Godard's](#) 1970 film, "Sympathy for the Devil"; and Tony Oursler's "Sound Digressions in Seven Colors," a 2006 video-sound installation of musicians individually improvising on their instruments.

Organized by a museum curator, Dominic Molon, it promises to be one of the more entertaining, informative — and raucous — museum visits of the fall season. Obviously expecting crowds, the museum has provided an audio tour with a playlist of clips: [David Bowie's](#) "Andy Warhol" (1971), the New York Dolls' "Personality Crisis" (1973), Laurie Anderson's "O Superman" (1981), Talking Heads' "Air" (1979) and Sonic Youth's "Kill Yr. Idols" (1983), among many others. The tour may be downloaded to personal iPods during a museum visit, and the songs may be purchased in their entirety on iTunes. (A link is helpfully provided on the museum's Web site, [mcaichicago.org](#).)

Along with more recent work — by Daniel Guzmán of Mexico City, the Japanese Pop artist Yoshitomo Nara and the Brazilian collective Assume Vivid Astro Focus, for example — the exhibition illustrates the global impact that rock has had on artists. It traces the roots of art-rock collaboration to a basic fascination with the intersection between images and sound.

Ms. Anderson, who once composed a violin piece based on Sol LeWitt's mathematical drawings, recalled the New York world of artists and musicians in the early 1970s, when Minimalism ruled the avant-garde. "The people who did the brainy rock did it at the Kitchen," she said. "CBGB's had the sweaty, soul rock."

While Ms. Anderson's career was flourishing, David Byrne was ricocheting from painting to photography to video to conceptual art, first at the Rhode Island School of Design and then at the Maryland Institute College of Art. Abandoning art school, he moved to New York in 1972.

At the time he had no musical ambitions, Mr. Byrne, the former lead singer of Talking Heads, said in a telephone interview. "When I came to the city, I wanted to show in galleries."

But Lee Ranaldo, a singer and guitarist with Sonic Youth, recalls that the art world back then was cordoned off. "It was easier to get an audition night at CBGB's than it was to get a show in a gallery," he said.

This exactly mirrored Mr. Byrne's experience. "We had this band," he said, "and eventually we wanted to play a set. We auditioned at CBGB's."

Attracted to punk rock's disregard for virtuosity, artists waiting for their big break in galleries began taking up musical instruments in the 1970s. "So many artists played in bands," said Robert Longo, who in 1977 formed one called Menthol Wars with his fellow artist Richard Prince. "It was amazing to hear music that sounded how your art looked."

The exhibition displays Mr. Longo's large-scale charcoal drawings from his "Men in the Cities" series and Mr. Prince's Ektaicolor "Portraits" of 1984, which include Dee Dee Ramone, Tina Weymouth of Talking Heads and Adele Bertei of the Contortions. "Everybody working in the underground Lower Manhattan music scene was coming out of some sort of art school," Mr. Ranaldo recalled in an interview from London, where Sonic Youth was touring. "There were visual art students, theater arts students, filmmaking students. We were all basically middle-class kids who were college educated. Everyone was hip to appropriation, Minimalism and Conceptual art practices — and applying that to the music that was going down."

But punk's heyday proved short-lived.

"Punk burned brightly for 18 months," said Peter Saville, one of the founders of Factory Records, an independent label in Manchester, England, that survived until 1992. By 1978 "those of us with a little more of an intellectual disposition," he said, "thought, 'What next?'"

New wave and postpunk bands proved fertile ground for Mr. Longo. "Music was like the gasoline that you put in the engine to make the car go," he said in an interview at his Little Italy studio, where his art surrounded three guitars and a bass. "Talking Heads and Joy Division became the biggest fuel for my work. That was when I got really productive."

Citing the multiple sources behind his 1980-82 "Men in the Cities" drawings, Mr. Longo singled out a Contortions gig at CBGB. "The way James Chance moved onstage — in spasms, almost like psychotic impulses," he said. "It really moved me." (The band's "Contort Yourself" from 1979 is featured on the show's playlist.)

In his Lower East Side studio, the video artist Mr. Oursler talked about rock 'n' roll's dismantling of what had once been an ivory-tower art world: "There was this idea pioneered by David Byrne and Laurie Anderson, that an artwork could be anything: a piece of sound, a movie, a piece of music or a videotaped installation."

He was interested in this crossover, he said, and also in reaching a wider audience. "David Byrne was a poster boy of that," said Mr. Oursler, whose work "Synesthesia" features an interview with Mr. Byrne and is in the Chicago show.

Mr. Byrne, for his part, was elated when fellow artists became fans of Talking Heads: "I remember in the late '70s when we were playing at CBGB's, there were all of these artists in the audience: Vito Acconci, Andy Warhol. These were big marquee names to us."

Isolated counterparts to New York's art-rock scene emerged, beginning in the late 1960s. The installation artist Mike Kelley, for example, who grew up in Detroit, recalls that in between rescuing art magazines from the recycling center he attended concerts by local bands like the MC5 or the Stooges. But when he and the artist Jim Shaw formed the noise band Destroy All Monsters at the [University of Michigan](#) in Ann Arbor, the reception was discouraging.

"They hated us," Mr. Kelley said from his studio in Los Angeles. When the band got a rare gig at the odd loft party, he said, "We were completely dismissed as a joke."

"Greetings From Detroit," portraits of members of the city's bands by the Destroy All Monsters collective, is in "Sympathy for the Devil."

When Mr. Kelley and Mr. Shaw became graduate students at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, there was a noise scene, "but it was made up of people mostly interested in themselves," Mr. Kelley said. The joke aspect of these performances became part of his act. Destroy All Monsters had a fanzine, he said, "But there were no fans, so it was more like a Duchampian kind of joke."

While still at Cal Arts, Mr. Kelley formed yet another band, the Poetics, with Mr. Oursler. This one, according to Mr. Oursler, presented the flip side of the art-pop crossover. "We were making music, screaming and doing weird performances in jockey shorts," Mr. Oursler said. "We were interested in pushing boundaries."

Kim Gordon, now a vocalist and guitarist for Sonic Youth, first met Mr. Kelley at a lecture given by Mr. Graham, the conceptual artist. And Mr. Graham, she recalled, played a role in her music career. In the early 1980s, when she was working at the Annina Nosei Gallery in SoHo, he asked her to collaborate on a performance that involved a mirror held up to the audience. "He asked me to start a girl band," she said, adding that a lot of women were involved in the underground experimental noise scene.

Shortly after that, the gallery scene exploded in the East Village and SoHo. "A lot of artists playing music stopped," Ms. Gordon said. "Because their careers took off."

As Mr. Ranaldo recalled the time: "Art started making a lot of money. The flood of money left musicians behind."

Vinyl records with their 12-inch covers were left behind as well, as CDs suspended artwork in a clear coat of easy-to-break plastic. Mr. Saville's album covers for Factory Records — the one in the exhibition is for New Order's 1983 album "Power, Corruption and Lies" — are the stuff of legend. Bands considered them so integral to their records, Mr. Byrne said, "They would hold up production until Peter had an idea."

In 1980 "Factory Records had a very loyal fan base of 50,000 people who bought everything that Factory produced," Mr. Saville said, explaining why he never needed to consider marketing when designing album covers.

"There were no tracks on the back of album covers," he noted. "No lyrics on the inside. No one was going to make any money. And no one was selling anything. We were assuming people would buy it whether things were labeled or not. And they did."

Under these conditions, Mr. Saville said, he enjoyed the rare autonomy associated with art. "You have to be outside of business to do anything real or true. And very little right now is outside of business."

Yet the earlier era of cross-fertilization in art and rock continues to fascinate. "Summer of Love," which recently closed at the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#), looked back to the art and music of 1967; "Panic Attack! Art of the Punk Years, 1974-84" recently ended a run at the Barbican Gallery in London.

"I think museums and galleries are hungry for young bodies," said Mr. Ranaldo, adding that a show of Sonic Youth's many collaborations with artists will tour Europe next summer. "Music is something very visceral that young people respond to. It's a much more immediate calling card than art."

Mr. Reed said he saw a renaissance of interest in combining art with music. "Now there are all of these amazing things you can do with the digital process," he said. "It's a very exciting time to be a young artist."