

Aesthetic Investigations

Published on behalf of the Dutch Association of Aesthetics



Review of Thomas Crow's *The Artist in the Counterculture: Bruce Conner to Mike Kelley and Other Tales from the Edge* (2023), Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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Thomas Crow's book *The Artist in the Counterculture: Bruce Conner to Mike Kelley and Other Tales from the Edge* (2023) reappraises West Coast art as enmeshed in counterculture. The first five of its twelve chapters discuss Bruce Conner's development as a multimedia artist in San Francisco and Los Angeles, producing assemblages, films, drawings, magazine illustrations, and light shows for rock concerts. The next five chapters expand Crow's argument by appraising anti-war manifestations, Black and Latino protest work, Land Art, and West Coast conceptual practices as aspects of the counterculture. Moving forward to the late 1970s, the final two chapters review Conner's reemergence as a photographer documenting California punk bands and then Mike Kelley's transplanting Detroit's alternative rock idealism to fuel the development of his radical West Coast art practices. The generous large-format illustrations of Crow's book remind us how an intoxication with visual art, performance, and music once transformed feelings and actions. Here, Conner is Crow's ferryman into a chaotic underworld, negotiating its complexities and cul-de-sacs, with Kelley finding an exit into the present from that tumult via countercultural landmarks.

Crow's choice of the preposition 'in' implies artists dropped in and out of the counterculture from a separate milieu, yet Conner's unconventional career is shown here in lockstep with countercultural manifestations of psychedelics, political revolt, sex, rock, light shows, and movies. Conner's studio path was nonlinear and frequently countered what art institutions found meritorious, his objects, materials, and ideas messy and uncompromisingly idiosyncratic. This account shows Conner more than ever *of* the counterculture rather than *in* it, a significant adjustment to the recent retrospective at MoMA, which presented this shape-shifter's art as possessing sufficient coherence and structure to be canonised as late-twentieth century masterworks. To give the unruly aesthetic of Conner's assemblages their due, Crow quotes the artist on his routinely celebrated, uncontainable studio procedures: 'They should happen anywhere, at any time, with audience or no audience, police sirens, naked ladies, flashlights, strawberry shortcakes, feathered elbows, dead mice [...] happenings happen all the time'.¹ Conner extended this inclusiveness into the late 70s by photographing Californian punk concerts in a series of remarkable documents of a scene that in the lyrics of The Deadbeats 1978 single, *Kill the Hippies*, definitively closed the counterculture: 'Kill 'em 'cause their hair's too long. / Kill 'em 'cause their views were wrong. / Kill, kill, kill hippies'.

Crow's introduction of Conner as a subculture luminary develops through a reappraisal of 'When Attitudes Become Form: Live in Your Head', curator Harald Szeemann's 1969 exhibition of American and European post-minimal artists. Although Conner wasn't included in the exhibition, its secondary title 'Live in your head' nevertheless celebrated the impact of West Coast 'hippie philosophy, the rockers, and the use of drugs,' as Szeemann effusively put it.² Whereas institutional revisionism eventually buried those subversive countercultural origins, Crow sees in Conner a commitment to unclassifiable practices that continued to demand recognition for their divergent motivations and results.

This book includes sections on oppositional political artwork by Corita Kent, Irving Petlin, Emory Douglas, and others that prove how oppressive was the impact of the Vietnam War on American artists' imaginations. Crow could have made more of this retention of countercultural associations in artists discussed later like John Baldessari, Chris Burden, and Michael Asher. Artists are invariably included as a *de facto* counterculture where Crow's text largely assumes a common understanding of what defines that term. When its amorphousness includes anything between a tripping Conner walking the Haight and the Weathermen's violence, the counterculture needs redefinition.³ Other texts on 60s art could have helped. For example, Marianne DeKoven considers hippie authoritarianism a countercultural anomaly that compelled adherence to causes.⁴ Julie Stevens finds the slipperiness of a counterculture that denotes an exit into mysticism and into radical activism an effective way to define that period's antidisciplinary politics.⁵ Thinking of Conner's ludic

mischievous, Richard Cándida Smith, who has developed one of the more subtle analyses of West Coast radicalisms, observed how artists, left only with symbolic positions of no value to those in power, had to ‘operate as a dream substratum within American society’.⁶ As much as Conner thrived by exercising his subversive creative eruptions in public for relatively large audiences and collaborating with prominent media figures like Timothy Leary, Toni Basil, and Dennis Hopper, his countercultural antipode Wallace Berman withdrew into a more discrete resistance by building intimate communities of mutual support, especially through his artist periodical *Semina*. Given that Cándida Smith depicts Berman as a family man, who structured his engagement with art to prioritise the wellbeing of his wife Shirley and son Tosh even as he was held up by his peers as the quintessential West Coast mentor, one wonders how this adjusts our praise of militant countercultural rebelliousness? Without a critical line running through Crow’s book, where the counterculture is questioned and reconfigured in the accounts of the artists, we are sometimes left with a series of career narratives tumbling into one another as a lengthening sequence of meandering events. This is certainly interesting, but less helpful in modeling new ways to tackle the contradictions of the period.

It would have been productive for Crow to more insistently unpick the reasons why Szeemann’s hippie ethos for ‘Live in Your Head’ was written out of history. Some of the show’s artists probably shunned the connotation as careers advanced, but it’s hard to believe Alighiero Boetti, David Medalla, Allen Ruppersberg, Richard Tuttle, or Keith Sonnier, who actually suggested the title to Szeemann, would have been bothered by it. Szeemann’s mind-blown claims superimposed a Californian sensibility over East Coast work and patrician New Yorkers would certainly have felt a lack of focus and depth to West Coast artists’ humour, conceptual breadth, and sensory excitement. Crow does provide a glimpse of this bias in a chapter on *Artforum* editor Philip Leider’s 1970 California zeitgeist visit and tour of Land Art sites with Richard Serra, Robert Smithson, and Nancy Holt. Leider had to write the piece himself, as his staff writers abhorred this new art. His breezy article randomly collects impressions as an alternative to *Artforum* gravitas and methodology. However, a footnote of Leider’s article, not mentioned by Crow, gives a clue as to the counterculture’s unstructured aims: “‘Revolution’ was the most often-used word I ran into this summer. Nobody used it to mean the transfer of political power from one class to another. Most of the time it seemed to refer to those activities which would most expeditiously bring America to her senses and force her to stop the war, end racism, and begin to take the lead among nations in rescuing the planet from the certain destruction toward which it was headed’.⁷ It’s here that Crow’s inspired introduction to Bonnie Sherk and Terry Fox’s environmental practices, both of which were critical of unchecked freeway development, shows its teeth with a premonition of what confronted the counterculture and wore it down: ‘A pervasive, sinister, and largely hidden array of forces seemed always to pre-

vail, such that dissent becomes a bleaker, more lonely witnessing to inhuman conditions largely immune to principled resistance'.⁸

But the challenges Leider faced, as he floundered around trying to articulate how the counterculture was opening up art practices, and the ineffectiveness of Szeemann's drug and rock mantra for framing a robust aesthetic, give clues to its historical erasure. 'Live in Your Head' ended a tumultuous decade of experimentation in realigning life with art and politics, and by the early 70s disenchantment began to outweigh claims of social transformation. The celebrated line from Hopper's movie *Easy Rider*, 'You know Billy... We blew it', presaged that disappointment, while in France and Germany the eclipse of May '68 idealism provoked writing like Michel De Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* and Peter Bürger's *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* that proposed new ways around the depressing political impasse of coopted and impotent art practices.⁹

In two chapters on art impacted by Vietnam and social unrest at home, Crow is successful in showing how certain work could coalesce political engagement. The 1966 Los Angeles Peace Tower that Petlin, Mark Di Suvero, Kenneth Dillon, and Anthony Saffello erected and surrounded by hundreds of artists' works defined increasingly polarised attitudes towards the war, to the point of provoking physical violence from passersby. Douglas' impactful militant illustrations for the *Black Panther* newspaper and Kent's inventive anti-war posters were calls to action that channeled the anger of their constituencies. In the 'Noir Vortex' chapter, Crow plays a joker card in the form of a longer meditation on the enigmatic Bas Jan Ader who occupied a strata of the counterculture apart from all others. Afflicted by an irreparable wartime parental backstory, Ader veiled his profound melancholy with a gossamer sensibility. Crow's hunch here of an alternative to well-trodden analyses of the period should spark an entire study of the less discernible margins of countercultural gestures. Ader's videotaped performances, during which he fell from a tree, house, or bicycle, his use of personal clothing and objects as props, and his handwritten text installations, demonstrate his spare economy of materials and ideas that was the counterculture at its most elusive and inestimable.

This brings us to Crow's provocative concluding claim that Mike Kelley was the last artist of the counterculture. However taut the chain linking Kelley to the 60s through Öyvind Fahlström, MC5, and Sun Ra, he has always been his most relevant as an artist refusing to glance backwards and instead reshaping an exhilaration with his own time. The extraordinary quote Crow provides of Kelley's encounter with a Sun Ra concert as 'the most intellectually and physically demanding show I have ever seen', was likely the reaction of many visitors to the artist's own incomparable 1993 Whitney Museum retrospective.¹⁰ Despite Kelley's aside that he would have chosen another career had he realised how mean the artworld was, he was a highly acclaimed and financially successful artist for most of his life. Perhaps this is Crow's

point, that no matter what his success, Kelley, appalled by popular culture, remained motivated by its repressed peripheries, always scrutinising what was overlooked or devalued to extract improbable forms and significances. There is much here to mirror Crow's recognition of Conner's uninhibited immersion in everything his time had to offer, while remaining apprehensive about its emptiness and addictiveness. In the end, perhaps Crow's title rings true, where the artist devises unpredictable entrances and exits that maintain an ambivalent oscillation in the counterculture to prevent a complete subsumption by that milieu.

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ENDNOTES

1. Crow 2023, 51.
2. Crow 2023, 3.
3. Crow 2023, 7.
4. DeKoven 2004, 157.
5. Stevens 1998.
6. Cándida Smith 1995, 211.
7. Leider 1970, 40.
8. Crow 2023, 147.
9. Certeau (1974) 1984; Bürger (1974) 1984.
10. Crow 2023, 11.

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