

“BOWIE” Rock’n’Roll Conduit as Conceptual Art Show

-Some notes on the significance of David Bowie, cultural transmission and contemporary art practice

Rupert Goldsworthy -Catalog essay, Fall 1998

It all started for me with “Starman,” a record my elder brother bought in 1972. Within six months I’d switched my allegiance from Marc Bolan and T.Rex to David Bowie. After getting “Ziggy Stardust,” I bought “Hunky Dory,” “Pin-Ups,” “Diamond Dogs” and almost anything David Bowie put out until around 1977.

I decided on the concept of this exhibition as part of a trilogy of exhibitions that focused on the 1970s and the new forms of beauty. The exhibition “Richard Hell” (October 10th -November 10th) was conceived as a rock-n-roll-as-art retrospective, where Hell, with his extreme cultural literacy (Lautreamont, Rimbaud, Huysmans) linked with “art brut,” which went on to define Punk visually and aesthetically. My memory growing up during Punk in London in 1976-77 was that it was a very clean, street-smart vibe, not the grubby Adams Family cartoon that it later became typecast as. Hell’s articulacy and intellectual range exemplify a certain sharpness of that era.

The exhibition “Terrorism” (planned for Spring 1999) focuses on the glamour that now seems to pervade late sixties and 1970s left-wing political terrorism (the Baader-Meinhof group in Germany, Patty Hearst and the SLA in California), and how a “Bonnie and Clyde” romanticism is retrospectively linked to violent revolutionary struggle.

The inclusion of an exhibition on the subject of David Bowie seems also important for an understanding of new structures of informational transmission in the 1970s. How can one artist appear to single-handedly redefine the possibilities of pop, bring into question style, gender, and create a source manual of cultural iconography?

To get an understanding of Bowie’s significance to his fans, one need only read the many pop biographies that credit Bowie as a precursor to their work and his influence on their teenage lives. (To name a few: Jon Savage’s “England’s Dreaming”, John Lydon’s “Rotten: No Dogs, No Blacks, No Irish”, Boy George’s “Take it Like a Man”, Holly Johnson’s “A Bone in my Flute”). These books all document Bowie’s profound importance to the founders of the Punk scene in Britain. He represented a refuge from high school and the corporate monster that AOR (adult-oriented rock) and Prog Rock had become by the mid 1970s.

When a South London Mod shaves off his eyebrows, “shags” his hair, paints his nails, and slips into a pair of cork wedges and a catsuit, then bursts into song on “Top of the Pops” in 1972, something is definitely up. The Wolfenden report in 1969, which decriminalized homosexuality in Britain, was crucial to David Bowie’s emergence from Beckenham Arts Lab mime artist to Pop’s first “drag queen” superstar. What was it in his zeitgeist that imprinted Bowie on all our collective fan brains? Bowie was way ahead of every other pop star in every possible way. And who else became such a fascinating changeling?

Bowie’s career appears to create a great narrative: he invents and defines “glitter rock,” a brief moment of early 1970s pop culture (the “Ziggy Stardust” album), moves on to document the seedy side of 1970s L.A. nightlife (“Aladdin Sane,” “Diamond Dogs”), rein-

vents his look and music radically with his new smooth “plastic soul” era (“David Live”, “Young Americans” and “Station to Station”) then goes truly “art” by exiling himself in Berlin (to produce “Low” and “Heroes” in 1977) with a new “artsy” look and an ambient, wall-of-sound musical austerity.

Beyond Bowie’s musical innovation, each of his album covers presented a whole new visual metamorphosis in his own look that became the prototype for thousands of “Bowieclone” fans. From the “Ziggy” period onwards, a cult around Bowie developed that swept parts of England and the States. Beyond his music, much seemed to be focused on visually mimicking Bowie’s personal style and on “being” him. It was almost disturbing to see how a pop star could so transfix his fans into identifying with and mirroring his androgynous look that they seemed swept into a maelstrom of gender dysphoria and narcissism, like Circe and the swine. One clue to Bowie’s particular fascination for his younger teenage fans may have been in his ability to literalize in his drag and his lyrics (i.e. “you’re not sure if you’re a boy or a girl”) sublimated fears and confusion around androgyny that many adolescents feel during puberty.

When I was at art school in England in the early 1980s, the art-history department impressed upon us the significance of Picasso and his development from his “Blue” period, to “Cubism” to his later changes and developments. Simultaneously the early 1980s saw England swamped with huge museum retrospectives on Picasso and his supposed enormous artistic significance and influence on art of the twentieth century. One factor that seemed overlooked was Picasso’s theft and plagiarism of other artists of his generation and his skill at continuing to do that over decades.

Similarly to the changes and plagiarism Picasso regularly practiced in painting, the career of David Bowie is also rife with appropriation. Bowie is exemplary as an artistic conduit of his media and era. Bowie plagiarized others musically, stylistically and visually. And then, ironically, by the early 1980s a huge band of Bowie copyists sprang up that still continue today. According to various biographers and certainly his then-wife Angela Barnett, Bowie was a huge cultural thief and pirate. A few brief examples being his Ziggy haircut and early drag outfits which are attributed to Angie, the designer Freddi Burretti and others; the guitar sound of the albums “Ziggy” to “Pin-Ups” was Mick Ronson’s; the gender-fuck look of “Ziggy” to “Diamond Dogs” was appropriated from the scene around the Mercer Art Center in New York (the New York Dolls) and the Sombrero Club, in Kensington in London. Bowie’s “admission of bisexuality” and invention of Glam rock was arguably preceded by Marc Bolan. The Berlin look and mythological lifestyle seems reminiscent of Christopher Isherwood’s “Berlin Diaries” (“Cabaret”), and the albums “Low” and “Heroes” owe a huge debt to Brian Eno’s long fascination with “ambient” music. However, Bowie’s ability to mesh all these elements cannot be denied.

Concurrent with the Picasso retrospectives across Britain in the early 1980s, “Bowie” night became the staple of hip urban and rural clubland. Here we cool kids from the art schools would gather dressed as Bowie or a Bowie associate in a weekly festival of narcissism and self-obsession. The best-known of these were the London clubs “Blitz,” “Hell” and Steve Strange’s “Club for Heroes” which spawned the short-lived New Romantic and Gothic movements of the early 1980s. Bowie’s huge influence can also be seen in an endless rash of pop bands that blatantly attempted to appropriate the Bowie style. To name just a few: Bauhaus (late 1970s, Bowie-lookalike singer and artsy German name), Boy George (early ’80s gender-bending chameleon look), Suede (early 1990s band, re-making early Bowie sound, with “Low” period look), Marilyn Manson (1990s version of “Aladdin Sane” replete with Bowie’s dilated “freak” eye).

But what then happened to Bowie in the later 1970s? His music seemed to suddenly and dramatically lose its cutting edge. Why did his magisterial reign end? Todd Haynes' Bowie biopic "Velvet Goldmine" ventures unconvincingly that the real genius whom Bowie plagiarized was Iggy Pop and that Bowie had finally had his "five years." Others suggest that the musicians and mentors that Bowie worked with in the 1980s and 90s lacked the originality that Eno, Fripp, Ronson, Visconti or Angie. Perhaps when Bowie went into rehab he spoiled the Faustian chemistry.

But perhaps other reasons were also there. Bowie's audience changed.

The army of Bowie obsessives that stalked the small towns and gay clubs of England had finally grown up, grown the eyebrows back, now had their own kids or had died of AIDS. Bowie, never afraid to move on, went "mainstream" in the '80s and packed stadiums playing to an audience of AOR suburbanites (a crowd that the original Bowie freaks had sought to escape by following him) and although the musical quality control appeared to drop, he appeared finally to make much money and have finally turned into just another global rock celebrity. Also, having built a career on the shock of his "bi-sexuality" and many years of cross-dressing and innuendo, Bowie stopped doing drag and then famously declared in the midst of the AIDS crisis that he was heterosexual. His gay fans understandably felt betrayed. And then he married Somalian supermodel Iman.

The idea of this exhibition came from seeing one too many group shows in New York on the theme of inheritors of Picasso's or Philip Guston's painting style or some other pointless semantic moment. At one point David Bowie represented unconventionality and a provocative individualism that challenged many status quo values. If you had any feeling of marginality in high school in the Bowie era 70s, he defined the outsider position -- in looks: super pale, red-haired, effete, deliberately freakish, artsy, odd. The very antithesis of the run-with-the-pack jocks. In this Bowie defined his own style -- half Garbo, and half isolated, gender-dysphoric, drugged-up rock casualty. The artists surrounding this gallery all range between 25 and 39, a large percent of them feel more strongly about the influence on their lives from the music and style of David Bowie than Philip Guston. So, at dinner one night after a group show, the idea came to make a show about an icon we all loved and could relate to as being historically important for us. Some of the works for the show were commissioned by Lithgow Osborne or myself, or were volunteered. Others, such as the works by Erik Hanson, Andrew Winer, Meredith Sparks, Robert Hawkins, Christian Marclay and Helen Sadler were already in existence.

The works fall predominantly into five categories:

Some works use Bowie's image as some kind of modern altar, fan homages that play on the beauty and strange androgyny of Bowie (works by Jane Kaplowitz, Ned Ambler, Frank Holliday, Tad Beck and Alex Bag).

Other works use a specific couplet of lyrics, (Nayland Blake, Christopher Brooks "blue, blue, electric blue, that's the color of my room...", Breezy Jones "Do you remember President Nixon and all the bills you had to pay?"), or use Bowie's work as a starting point, an example being the cod conceptualism of Erik Hanson's "Heroes DAD" piece which uses the time statistics of the "Heroes" album as the basis for an abstract painting). Christian Marclay and Nayland Blake echo Bowie's use of "cut-up" (Blake assembles the lyric "Wise like orangutan" from the song "African Nightlife," perhaps alluding to issues of race?). Guy

Richards Smit (as Maxi Geil and Play Colt) produces a music video, a deliberate polar opposite to the song "Heroes," dwelling on not wishing to "connect."

Other works echo the motif of Bowie as transformer/conduit: works by Mr. Leonard and Robert Hawkins focus on Bowie's eerily fascinating transmutations between genders and species. "I Love my Chameleon" by Rob Pruitt also plays with the metaphor of Bowie's continual Protean transformation. Pruitt's chameleon in a rainbow-sticker-covered tank alludes to Bowie's appropriation of gay subculture and that subculture's continual state of flux. (The rainbow flag signifying the gay liberation movement).

Some works address more complex issues around stardom, privacy and obsession: Helen Sadler paints the face of a transfixed fan, taken from a film still of a Bowie concert. "Angie Bowie/I'm Bisexual" by Lucky de Bellevue and Jeff Davis, focuses on the private/public aspect of celebrity, sampling the most bitter moments of Bowie's ex-wife's memoirs, as she reveals every intimate detail of her life with him. The work resonates with themes around the violation of privacy that fame allows, and the prurient, no-holes-barred nature of obsessive fandom. "BowieWEINERmorph (siamese)" by Andrew Winer is a painting of the artist's head melding with Bowie's. It addresses issues of fan enmeshment and transference with a significant other.

Bowie is a star who is extremely seductive on stage but was in his heyday also reputed to be extremely "untouchable" in real life. In the mid-70s, Bowie's elusive, Garbo-like aloofness, perhaps fueled by his sinking into cocaine addiction, left space for fan obsession and worship that a less-comatose artist would not have attracted. The narcissism of a pop star requires mass adoration. Many adolescents and obsessive fans have both a painful need to connect and a fragile sense of their own identity. The diadic relationship between narcissistic tell-all megastar and obsessive fan strikes a difficult and often dangerous balance. (The John Lennon/Mark Chapman story is the nightmarish outplaying of that dynamic). This group of artworks touch on the complex power relationships around fan "ownership" and identification, differing economic situations, and the vulnerability of celebrity.

Somehow the final piece in the show seems to be Tony Oursler's collaborative video work with Bowie himself. Oursler's work, video projection onto dummy's heads, uses Bowie's head as a model. The work plays on the ludicrousness of a tiny, gesticulating, neurotic little figure trapped -- quite literally a puppet. Given Bowie's oft-stated interest in German Expressionism, Oursler's video puppets resonate very strongly with themes in Bowie's own work: isolation and narcissism at one's own ugliness/strangeness. The collaboration wraps many of the themes into one piece.

David Bowie continues to work as musician and artist, and although his reign as king (or former queen) of art rock throughout the 1970s is now over, he will no doubt continue to make interesting work. Bowie's career as a musician is exemplary of how an artist can act as a conduit or transformer, transmitting subcultural ideas into the mainstream, and then how his appropriation and originality is then continuously ransacked by succeeding artists in music, cinema and art. It is hard to think of another pop musician of this era who has exerted such a wide reaching influence, expanding the possibilities of his medium or acting as such a cross-generational and cross-cultural transmitter.

-Rupert Goldsworthy

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