

Barbara London: Looking at Music

Music was at the forefront of interdisciplinary experimentation in the 1960s, when the mixing of mediums took off. Portable video cameras, electric guitars, and an aura of technical innovation all fostered radical experimentation; it seemed as though every artist was in a band, and some artists studied music formally before gravitating to one of the new art forms. The dynamic cross-fertilizations that occurred in music, video, installation, and what was known as “mixed media” art in the decade after 1965 had an impact on art practice and spawned the short form of the music video. Videos by David Bowie, Captain Beefheart, The Residents, and Laurie Anderson reveal the raw innocence characteristic of the mixed media art of the era.

Barbara London will explore the connections among musically inclined artists who confronted the challenges of evolving technologies through their activities on the periphery of the art world. Yoko Ono was a tangential member of Fluxus, the loosely associated avantgarde artists that developed in the early 1960s around George Maciunas. John Cage was one of the most important influences on Ono’s practice. Jack Smith, the larger-than-life pioneer of underground cinema, was one of the founders of performance art and the pre-Warhol creator of the superstar. In the early 1960s at midnight events in his downtown Manhattan loft, no one quite knew the distinction between Smith’s life and his art, where the latter began during those protracted four-hour evenings. La Monte Young, generally recognized as the first minimalist composer, has been extremely influential on his younger visual and music associates:

David Bowie played the saxophone from age thirteen. After graduating from a technical high school with a strong art department, he worked as a commercial artist before studying mime and later playing in bands. He co-founded Beckenham Arts Lab in 1969, a crucible for artistic experimentation where visual artists created original work, poets did readings, and events such as light shows, theatre, dance, puppet shows were held. He made his first music video for his single „Space Oddity“, recorded and released to coincide with the first moon landing, working with Mick Rock.

New York was known then for its art rock. Andy Warhol’s Interview revealed a vision of ravaged glamour in the faces of the crowds at the Mercer Arts Center and Max’s Kansas City. Out of this context the unassuming media maverick Laurie Anderson emerged. Audiences responded to the commonality of her everyday experiences, which she seemed to orchestrate effortlessly with layers of audio-visuals. Through Warner Records she made her first music video, “O Superman” (1981), just in time for the start of MTV. Multimedia artist and animator Perry Hoberman – who had been turning obsolete technologies, such as 3-D slide systems, into droll animated narrative installations – joined Anderson as the video’s artistic director.