

Noise, Control, Noise

Sonic Youth's Audio Visuals

BY WILLIAM R. KAIZEN

I wish they all could be California girls

—The Beach Boys, "California Girls," 1965

We're gonna kill the California girls

—Sonic Youth, "Express Way to Yr. Skull," 1986

Inspired by zine culture as much as appropriationist art strategies, Sonic Youth's early album art reflected the band's obsession with popular culture—seen here in the LP insert for Evol (1986).



For two decades the art-rock ensemble Sonic Youth—guitarists Thurston Moore and Lee Renaldo, bassist/guitarist Kim Gordon, and (since 1986) drummer Steve Shelley—have been heralded as one of the most innovative and influential bands of the American alter-


native rock movement. Emerging out of the same New York art scene as Jean-Michel Basquiat and David Wojnarowicz, Sonic Youth shares many of the same conceptual and aesthetic sensibilities and has held numerous personal ties to some of the most important artists of the era. Initially Sonic Youth charted previously unexplored territory by using screwdrivers and drumsticks in combination with radical guitar tunings and configurations. But the increasing play in their music between pop/rock song-structure and aural dissonance is what gained them a devout cult following around the world and eventually a contract with the major label DGC (Geffen). While the commodification of grunge in the early '90s swept Sonic Youth along with it, exposing their music to many new listeners, a series of recent

releases on their own SYR (Sonic Youth Records) label has seen the band return to less commercially-oriented recordings in collaboration with some of the masters of 20th century avant-garde music.

To document Sonic Youth's relevance as both a musical collective and an art world entity, the New York-based non-profit Printed Matter—which since 1976 has devoted itself to supporting and documenting publications made by artists—held an exhibition last summer titled "Sonic Matters, Sonic Kollaborations." Featuring the ephemera produced by Sonic Youth to promote themselves during their early years, the show included flyers, posters, record covers, zines and videos, many of which were done in collaboration with other artists and musicians. Like their music, Sonic Youth's graphics are caught between noise and pop, their visual images combining the noisy degradation of re-Xeroxing with the appropriation of images and themes from mass culture. As testament to the importance of this exhibition in relation to Sonic Youth's musical accomplishments, the show will travel over the next year to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; Art Metropole, Toronto; and the Palais de Beaux Arts, Brussels. —Eds.

'D GIVE MY SOUL TO BE WHERE
WAS A YEAR AGO.

IF I HAD
A SOUL
LEFT TO
GIVE.



sonic youth

Sonic Youth makes noise but their noise is under tension, brought under control and framed by the conventions of rock. Noise and control both alternating and layered, with the clamor of guitars, repeating and ringing like chiming bells, with drums hitting four over four, finally falling off in a slowed down, entropic dissolve into primordial static, keeping the beat going all the while with vocals, dead pan, whine over top, and over that guitars buzzing with no-chords and feedback looping out into the audience, louder and louder.

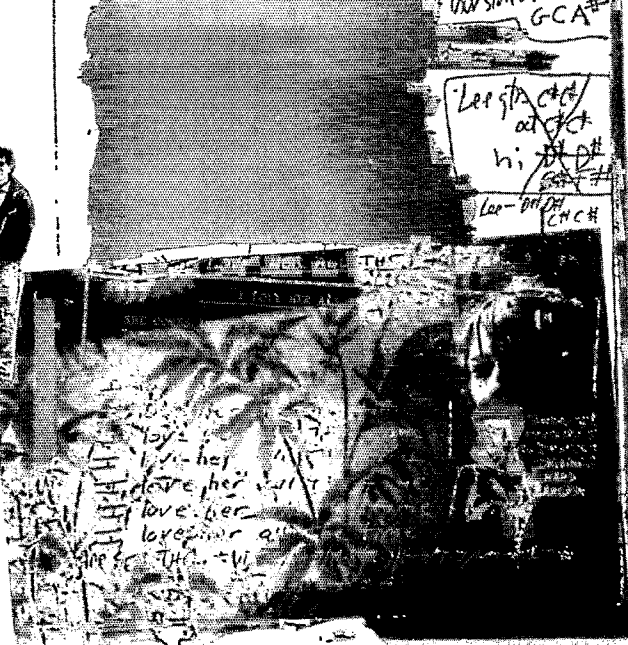
In everyday life noise comes before music: cars going by on the street, birds singing, the rustle of trees, people yelling, dogs barking. Sound comes from everywhere without any particular form. It is the background surrounding us that we tune out. Music contains the randomness of sound. It fights to control it, to keep it from becoming noise and devolving into non-meaning. The endless info-flow of our so-called information age depends on the regular, metered beat of electrical switches, a patterning of on and off and on. If information existed in an ideal world, every message would be transferred pre-

cisely on the first try but, as anyone who has played whisper down the lane knows, noise always interrupts the flow. Noise breaks the code. It is an informational, the erasure of data's meaning. It flows across the surface of information in a continual movement toward de-differentiation.

If noise is sonic death (dead sound, information without meaning) then music is the socialization of death, a ritual that orders the meaninglessness of life. Music imposes order on chaos. It takes the world's random sounds and organizes them into repeatable forms channeling disorder and controlling non-meaning. It turns unformed sound into harmony, aligning it with the scales, and allowing for composition. Music is the creation of meaning out of the noise of the world.

Jacques Attali, in *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, says that "when [noise] is fashioned by man with specific tools, when it invades man's time, when it becomes sound, noise is the source of purpose and power, of the dream—Music." Attali links religious sacrifice and the music as it developed in early societies. His two propo-

IF ON THE
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Merging traditional rock photo-documentation with scrawled lyrics, artwork, and a cryptic system of notations used to identify guitar tunings unique to each song—seen here in the CD insert for *Bad Moon Rising* (1985)—Sonic Youth exposed process in both their visuals and their music.

sitions are, “first, that noise is violence: it disturbs. To make noise is to interrupt a transmission, to disconnect, to kill. It is a simulacrum of murder. Second, that music is a channelization of noise, and therefore a simulacrum of the sacrifice. It is thus a sublimation, an exacerbation of the imaginary, at the same time as the creation of social order and political integration.”²²

The religious sacrifice of one's enemies after battle was also a way for man to gain control over death, of asking for order in a world of famine or war, of ensuring the crops would renew themselves and that the boys return from battle. Sacrifice channels the violence of nature politically. It uses the social organization of religion as a way to symbolically control violence, to sublimate it and manage it. Music controls random sounds like sacrifice controls random death. Is the socialized control of a world that exists, first and foremost, beyond man's control. The noise of the world is channeled through music and when music unchannels noise it symbolically re-enacts death, it makes us recognize that life is nothing but an attempt to order and control the randomness of existence.

Check an early Sonic Youth song like “Expressway to Yr. Skull,” from their album *EVOL* (named after a video by Tony Oursler, a friend of Kim Gordon's from her California art school days, that the band particularly liked). They start with the rock. A few bars on a guitar, then drums and more guitar, then the lyrics: “We're gonna kill/the California Girls/We're gonna fire/the exploding load in the milkmaid maidenhead...” The '60s are dead, long live the '60s! Or the myth of the '60s anyway, as maidenhead, motherhood. And then, literally, fuck the '60s: “...We're gonna find the meaning of feeling good/and we're gonna stay there as long as we think we should...” Get your kicks in neo-psychedelia, Thurston Moore's vocals somewhere between the Turtles and a deadpan Lou Reed. Then a hint of melody creeps in but more talk than singing and then, as the jangling guitars suddenly begin looping through downward slides on the neck, almost C&W style, the chorus: “...The Mystery Train is two way plane/one way is the expressway to your skull...”, a tribute to Greil Marcus' book on the origins of rock and a recognition that sound transmission is the phenomenological flow, the circuit between man the transmitter, the technological object and man the receiver. Here comes the noise. The load explodes, guitar lines ascend, ringing in discord, sound waves in asynchronous collision, and then up into a distorted clamor, the drum beat recedes, four/four disappearing downwards, more noise, then back, a quick return to the chorus, a ritornelle that's just a little wink before the noise again, only this time it's a falling off,

noise down low, a rumbling and bass-clang, crawling on the floor noise, slow dirt noise that drags on until the song fades out or rather drifts off and the record ends, except on the vinyl where a locked groove holds the last two notes indefinitely, until you get up and lift the needle from the record.

In the early and mid-'70s, in opposition to the arena-sizing of rock, New York gave birth to punk. With bands like the New York Dolls and the Ramones, simple three-chord arrangements, curled lip, j.d. attitude and loud, louder, loudest guitars ruled. By the late '70s punk had fled to England's greener pastures and was soon canned and

sold back to the rest of the world by Malcolm McLaren as so much commodified rebellion. The most noteworthy bands of the time—The Ramones, the Voidoids, Television, Patti Smith, the Talking Heads, Blondie—had all staked their various claims and moved on, either to fame or oblivion (or sometimes both). All had left downtown N.Y. long behind. But as New Wave turned into Goth and heavy metal stole punk's attitude but not its message, another crop of bands sprung up, begun by kids like the members of Sonic Youth: mostly white, mostly middle class, raised on rock but gone off to collage, many studying the visual arts.

“There was this whole crowd of people that moved to New York in the late '70s and formed bands,” says Lee Renaldo. “People came as visual artists and gradually everybody gravitated back to music with a more conceptual aesthetic, with the idea that you could take the elements of this art form that you loved growing up—rock music—and use that medium to make art.”

While in college in upstate New York, Renaldo had played in a band called the Fluxts named after Fluxus, a visual art collective he admired. When he moved to New York to continue his work as a painter, he began playing music with Glenn Branca and Rhys Chatham, both of whom were part of this new group of musicians exploring the limits of sound and performance with pseudo-rock bands that made honk-and-skronk distorted jazz rock, noisy and much less structured than any arena rock. Their sound was a combination of the Velvet Underground's 17-minute drone opus “Sister Ray” and the early records of the Stooges with a little free jazz improv thrown in for good measure. Other bands like Mars and DNA covered similar musical ground and their sound soon came to be collectively known as No Wave, the “no” of noise blurring out New Wave's synth-pop.

By the end of the '70s, Branca and Chatham were moving in even more experimental directions. Taking their cue from the minimalism of Philip Glass and Steve Reich (both of whom—but Reich in particular—were also part of the downtown scene), they created a sort of rock minimalism, using amplified guitars in continuous repetition

to create a wall of sound in which chords, through repetition, unfolded into remarkable complexity. In 1979, both Branca and Chatham premiered the first of their minimal pieces and Renaldo went to see Chatham perform "Guitar Trio" at Max's Kansas City.

"It's basically just this one chord for half an hour," Renaldo describes, "and it has all this overtone stuff happening in it. They played for half-an-hour then they played it again for half-an-hour with slides that Robert Longo projected. It was remarkable because it was completely minimal and it was completely overwhelming at the same time. Next to nothing was outwardly happening and yet aurally it was this incredible experience." At the time Renaldo wasn't playing much music, but when he saw an ad Branca had placed in the *Village Voice* looking for musicians to join his ever-expanding band, he signed up. It was early 1980 and Renaldo toured the U.S. with Branca. At the end of the year they recorded *The Ascension*, Branca's first non-rock record.

But by the end of 1980 No Wave was fizzling out, killed by fame for some and not for others. Brian Eno's compilation, *No New York*, "stamped the scene and ended it," says Renaldo. "That record alienated a lot of people, quite frankly. It also turned an awful lot of people on around the country. For most people still, that's their only experience of No Wave music." Admitting that *No New York* is "a great document, but very limited," Renaldo recounts the story that Eno had originally intended to include more than just the four bands who ended up on it, but Lydia Lunch (whose band Teenage Jesus and the Jerks was a key group in the No Wave scene and was one of the bands chosen for the record) advised Eno to include more songs by fewer bands to make the record "stronger." Important artists like Branca and Chatham were left off the record and "it created a lot of hard feelings within the scene." After *No New York* was released, most of the rock-oriented No Wave bands had split up and the more compositionally minded performers stopped performing at rock clubs.

Tod Jorgensen was another young artist who moved to New York in the late '70s. At an exhibition held at Ken Hansen's gallery (Fluxus artist Al Hansen's brother; father to the '90s rock star Beck), he saw Xerox art for the first time. Jorgensen liked the way the copies looked and got hooked on them, soon spending all his money producing his own. To subsidize his addiction, he got a job at the local art supply store as a Xerox technician so he could make his own work for free. While working there Jorgensen helped artists like Robert Rauschenberg, David Wojnarowicz and Jean-Michel Basquiat make copy art. He and Basquiat hit it off particularly well, becoming friends and working on a series of small post-card-like copies together.

While working by day making copies, Jorgensen and Arleen Schloss, another downtown artist, turned her Soho loft into a club. They named the space A's (their logo was an "A" with a circle around it, for both Arleen and anarchy), and three to four nights a week they began booking performance artists and bands. Erik Bogosian performed, as well as most of the No Wave bands. Basquiat's band SAMO played there. Jorgensen's favorite band, the one he booked as often as he could, was a group of tall, skinny, post-New Wavers named the Coachmen. "When they walked in with their guitars they looked like a punk basketball team," Jorgensen says.

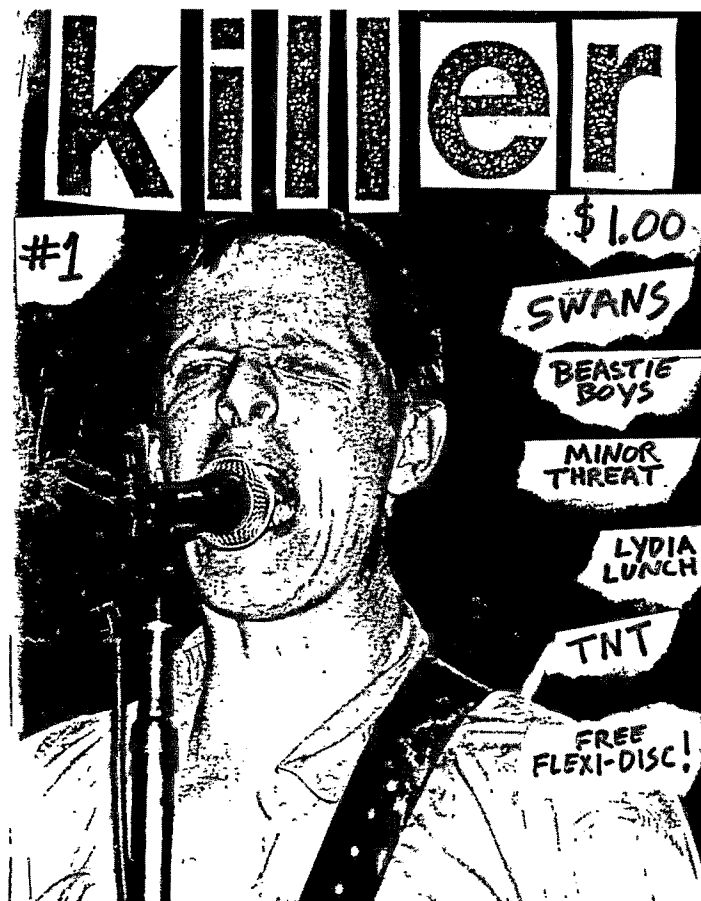
Thurston Moore was the Coachmen's guitarist, a teenager from Connecticut who had also recently moved to New York to play music like his idol Patti Smith. The Coachmen split up and Moore began playing with other musicians, including Kim Gordon. They began gigging around with various people (and eventually dating...and,

much later, getting married which they happily remain to this day). As band members floated in and out they changed their name from Red Milk to Male Bonding to the Arcadians, all the while becoming more and more a part of the new downtown post-punk art-rock scene.

Gordon had attended art school in California, where she met artist Mike Kelley. They drove east together and Gordon quickly made her way into the New York art world. She worked at Annina Nosei's gallery, stayed in Jenny Holzer's loft and eventually settled into an apartment in a building downstairs from Dan Graham, who also befriended her. "I got Kim an apartment downstairs from me," says Graham. "Then she met Thurston and they lived there for about 12 years." With Graham's encouragement, Gordon began writing for various magazines, including *Artforum*. Graham says, "Her first article, which she got in *Reel Life*, was an article about male bonding. I'd written 'New Wave Feminism' about girl bonding and it was a response to that."

Gordon was also making art under the name Design Office. She had established a pseudo-interior design firm whose tag line was "furniture arranged for the home or office." One of Gordon's projects included rearranging Graham's apartment, hanging a picture of Debbie Harry she painted on the wall (which he still has) and installing a new rubberized floor.

Gordon also happened to be friends with Josh Baer, son of minimalist painter Jo Baer, who had just opened a non-profit gallery called White Columns. Gordon did an installation there as Design Office, emptying out one of the galleries and putting chairs in it. Confused visitors sat down in the chairs wondering where the art was. When Baer wanted to hold a combination music and art festival at



Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore merged his interest in Xeroxing and his mania for collecting punk and hardcore records and zines to produce *Killer*, a zine which covered post No Wave bands and select non-NY bands.

the gallery, he invited Gordon and Moore to organize it. Moore called it the Noise Fest, nine days of post-No Wave music with art work by various band members and affiliated friends hanging on the walls. (The name of the festival came after a local rock club promoter called the new music “nothing but noise.”) Gordon and Moore created a new band for the Noise Fest, calling it Sonic Youth. Renaldo also played, appearing with his friend David Linton in a Dan-Graham-inspired set featuring live video delays of their performance shown on stage while they played. Gordon and Moore lost yet another band member during the Fest and, after seeing Renaldo play, they recruited him for Sonic Youth. Immediately after the festival ended the group began in earnest. “We started playing together right after that,” Renaldo says, “and that’s how everything started.”

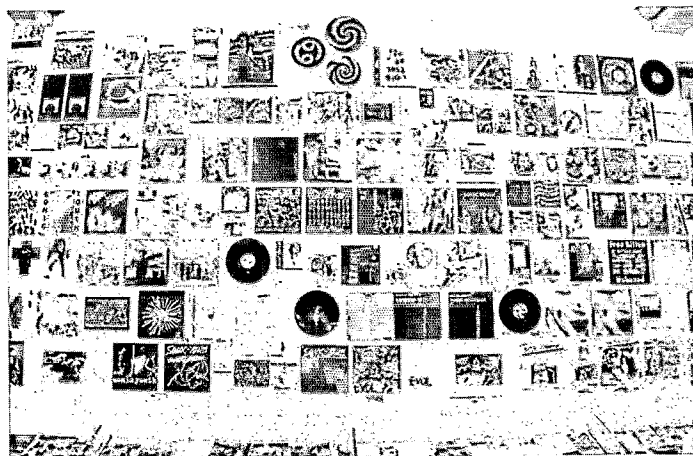
Around the same time that Sonic Youth were starting out, Jorgensen finally got sick of working for someone else. He opened his own copy shop and called it Todd’s Copies. In business for 10 years, it became a mecca for artists who wanted to make their own Xerox artwork and as a place where artists and musicians could find flexible employment, where they could make a little money so they could continue making their own art. Jorgensen remembers everyone from Robert Frank to David Wojnarowicz to Burt Stern (who took the last photos of Marilyn Monroe before her death) coming through his shop. Gordon and Moore were two of his first employees.

Moore was particularly interested in Xeroxing. His music mania (he was, and still is, a notorious record collector) lead him to collect every punk and hardcore zine he could get his hands on. In the early ’80s he began producing his own zine called *Killer*, a double entendre for both “murderer” and California skater slang for cool as in, “all killer, no filler.” It covered bands that were part of the post No Wave New York music scene, Swans, Foetus, Lydia Lunch, Rat at Rat R, Live Skull, as well as non-NY bands like Black Flag, Negative Approach and Flipper.

Sonic Youth’s printed graphics—the focus of the exhibition at Printed Matter—are just as noisy as their music, an extension of their obsession with rock and pop culture into their visuals. As in their sonic production, they channel their graphics through noise. Trained as visual artists (and Renaldo continues to make visual art today), they designed a visual image to match their sound.

The cover of Sonic Youth’s first full LP, *Confusion is Sex*, was inspired by zine culture. “Immediately after our first record, our cover art switched into Xeroxed, low-fi imagery,” Renaldo says. “*Confusion is Sex* has that photographic collage on one side that I did and Kim’s drawing on the other and they’re both really degraded by the Xerox machine. That was in enthusiastic response to the hardcore scene. A lot of that stuff had that kind of look to. These kids were not artists, there were just like throwing-up on the paper, going to the local Xerox store and just Xeroxing whatever. We were inspired by that kind of thing but crossed that with what was going on in the art world at that time. You already at that point in time had people working with the idea of appropriating popular culture and using it in different ways, like Sherrie Levine for one, but all different people were taking elements from popular culture and recycling it and calling it art.”

One of the most prominent parts of the exhibition and of Sonic Youth’s graphic production were the Xeroxed gig flyers that the band made to promote their up-coming shows. Their flyers were purposely as hand-made looking as possible, scrawled hand-writing and repeated Xeroxing causing the visuals to devolve into noise, with each successive copy becoming more and more degraded. They’d stop



For Sonic Youth’s recent exhibition at Printed Matter, “Sonic Matters, Sonic Kollaborations,” guitarists Thurston Moore and Lee Renaldo worked with curator Todd Alden to transform the bookstore into a record shop of sorts, filling the windows and the side walls with old show posters and flyers and covering the back wall from top to bottom with records. Several vitrines scattered throughout the exhibition contained zines, art magazine spreads and back stage passes (photo courtesy of Printed Matter).

copying just short of illegibility, barely maintaining that line between readability and the dissolution of image into black dots and indecipherable lines.

After *Confusion is Sex*, Sonic Youth began to collaborate with artists on their record covers. They worked with friends or friends of friends who also explored the hidden dissonances of pop culture. Their early, independently released records featured art by James Welling (*Bad Moon Rising*), Richard Kern (*EVOL*) and Gerhard Richter (the “Death Valley ‘69” single and *Daydream Nation*). When they signed to a major label they became part of the pop culture industry that they had spent so many years playing with and against. Their album cover collaborations reflected this new, ambiguous position as musical outsiders brought into the inside of mass-production. On *Goo*, their first major release, they worked with Raymond Pettibon. Pettibon is the brother to Gregg Ginn, ex-Black Flag guitarist and head of SST Records, formerly Sonic Youth’s indie label.

Renaldo describes the cover of their major label release: “For *Goo* I guess we wanted something about the art work to make it clear that we hadn’t left anything behind just because it said Geffen on the back of the record. We wanted it to have that crude quality. Initially we were going to use this other piece of Pettibon’s that was a really weird portrait of the face of Joan Crawford. It was black with these huge red lips and it said, ‘blowjob’ with a question mark under it, and we were going to use that for the cover and call the record *blowjob*. I don’t think Geffen was too happy with that idea and in the end I think we pulled it out ourselves because we thought it was too ridiculous so we chose this one which was a close second I guess.”

For their next major release they worked with Gordon’s old friend Mike Kelley. In 1986, Sonic Youth had played as back-up to his performance *Plato’s Cave*, *Rothko’s Chapel*, *Lincoln’s Profile* at Artist Space in New York. When they asked him for potential cover art images he pointed them toward a set of photographs he had just published in the Canadian art magazine *21st Century*. The images were mug shots of hand-made stuffed animals plus one of Kelley himself as a zit-face teenager. The cuddly animals were transformed into deadpan replicants of Sonic Youth’s audience, lovable but malformed and, as the title of the record they appeared on implies, *Dirty*.

A special limited edition of *Dirty* contained another image by Kelley hiding behind the CD. It showed performance artists Sherri Rose and Bob “Supermasochist” Flanagan performing obscene acts with stuffed toys, Rose humping one, Flanagan wiping his shit-smearred ass

with another. This was Sonic Youth reply to Nirvana's grunge revolution and their audience got the joke. On the tour to support the album, the band bought stuffed animals at thrift stores which they sold as concessions. They sold out of them almost immediately.

For the past 20 years and still counting, from their art-school, art rock, downtown beginnings, Sonic Youth has let loose both the audio and the visual noise. Beyond rock refrains and over regular beats and with the Xerox distortion and culture jamming of their graphics, they fall into discord, disharmony, even white noise but they always bring that beat back. They go from noise back to rock, swinging from meaning to non-meaning, spinning out and then regaining control, a continuous imposition of and dissolution of form. Noise always interrupts Sonic Youth's rock signal. They give in to it but they fight it just the same, putting that noise back in place, channeling it back into music, into good form, and then letting it spill out again.

If the '70s saw the bloating of rock, its ultra-global-super-mass-popularization as a commercial art form with the good times, get high and get by music of neo-psych-prog rock—Rush, E.L.O., E.L.P. and the still limping along Rolling Stones, Who, Kinks—there was also an evil flip side to this post-'60s hippie dream. When Sonic Youth began not only were the '60s dead, so were the '70s. It was the '80s, the decade that began with the death of John Lennon and the election of Ronald Reagan. By 1980, Charles Manson was as much part of the popular imagination as the Beatles.

But this other side, where noise allows evil and death to return, disrupting gestalt and killing meaning, can also be productive, causing the dominant codes to mutate. Noise creates new meaning. "A network can be destroyed by noises that attack and transforms it, if the codes in place are unable to normalize and repress them," Attali says. "Although the new order is not contained in the structure of the old, it is nonetheless not a product of chance. It is created by the substitution of new differences for the old differences. Noise is the source of these mutations in the structuring codes...The presence of noise makes sense, makes

meaning. It makes possible the creation of a new order on another level of organization, of a new code in another network."³

Now this may not hold true for the transmission of computer data, when the transmitted information is so dense and each infinitesimal part so important that any disruption can (at least potentially) completely destroy the code, but think of the nonsense turned sense words of a dada poem by Hugo Ball or the new sense Pollock's drips gave to painting. What at first seems like noise often gives way to a new system, a new network in which noise is suddenly transformed into music. "Subversion in musical production opposes a new syntax to the existing syntax, from the point of view of which it is noise," says Attali. "Transitions of this kind have been occurring since antiquity and have led to the creation of new codes within changing networks. Thus the transition from the Greek and medieval scales to the tempered and modern scales can be interpreted as aggression against the dominant code by noise destined to become a new dominant code."⁴ Or think of the various moments of noise-turned-into-music in rock: the Velvet Underground, Jimi Hendrix, The Stooges, or today, Autechre, Square Pusher, RZA. Sonic Youth took noise and turned it into rock, influencing uncountable numbers of bands and virtually defining alt rock as a musical genre.

As their major label releases progressively became (with the possible exception of *Washing Machine*) increasingly tame, the band has continued to make noise, exploring free jazz and electronica in unannounced shows or playing with other musicians. Several years ago they started their own record lable, SYR (Sonic Youth Records) where they could release more challenging music. With SYR they began to release music which was almost pure noise, the rock distilled out and released on their major label albums for their more mainstream audience. One recent release on SYR is *Goodbye Twentieth Century*, a two-CD set of covers by some of the best known avant-garde classical composers of the last millennium, including Pauline Oliveros, John Cage and Steve Reich. SYR also allows the band to put out projects where not all of them participate. Their most recent release is a collaboration between Kim Gordon, DJ Olive and former drummer for the No Wave band Mars, Luke Mori.

Sonic Youth continues charting the drift of noise to control and now, with SYR, they've returned to full-on noise again. Since 1980 they've come a long way but their basic premise hasn't changed. Their obsession with sonic death in their sound, lyrics and visuals, with the failures of the '60s, with Manson and bad trips, this is the Sonic, the noise, the disordering entropy of their sound. Their obsession with kid's culture, with Hardcore and Madonna and MTV, with grunge and fashion, this is the rock, the Youth, rock as childhood packaged and sold. On one of their very first releases, the *Kill Yr. Idols 7*", they say, "Kill yr. idols/With sonic death." and even now, after they've been included in their own little way into the star system, they continue to push fame toward disorder. As Gordon prophetically sang on their song "Starpower," long before she was famous, sometimes being both inside and outside the system hurts: "Close my eyes and think of you/Everything turns black to blue/Star power, star power, star power, all over me..." ⁵

NOTE: All information for this article comes from interviews the author conducted with Lee Renaldo, Tod Jorgensen and Dan Graham and from Alec Foege's excellent biography of the band *Confusion is Next: The Sonic Youth Story*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994. 1. Attali, Jacques. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. p. 6. 2. *ibid.*, p. 26. 3. *ibid.*, p. 33. 4. *ibid.*



For Goo (1990), Sonic Youth's first major-label release, the band worked with artist Raymond Pettibon to create the distinctive look of Pettibon's many contributions to the independent label SST Records throughout the '80s.

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