# MARK MOTHERSBAUGH MYYOPIA

EDITED BY

FOREWORD BY WES ANDERSON

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essays by

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## PUNK ROCK FUTURIST

## **MARIA ELENA BUSZEK**



#### above:

Scene from Robert Benedetti's 1980 restaging of *Victory Over the Sun*.

### opposite:

This Enigma Records promotional image features the best of DEVO's many outrageous costumes and showcases the elements of their performance influenced by the 1913 "futurist opera" Victory Over the Sun. In September 1980, as part of its groundbreaking exhibition *The Avant-Garde in Russia, 1910–1930*, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) commissioned the director Robert Benedetti to restage the legendary 1913 "futurist opera" *Victory Over the Sun.*<sup>1</sup> The performance piece was a collaboration between the composer Mikhail Matiushin, the writer Aleksei Kruchenykh, and the artist Kazimir Malevich that—like so much work from the modernist movements in the years around World War I—sought to radically, angrily break from the ideals of the previous century.

Mark Mothersbaugh and his DEVO cofounder Gerald Casale attended one of LACMA's sold-out performances of Victory Over the Sun—the first in sixty years, and the first ever outside Russia. The show's atmosphere in 1980 uncannily matched historical accounts of the 1913 original. Rooted in an experimental expression its authors called *zaum*—literally, "beyond the mind"—the performance featured a dissonant score; hodgepodge language spiked with nonsensical, often onomatopoeic sounds; disorienting, abstract stage sets; and performers who moved like Kabuki robots in jagged, geometric costumes made of cardboard and wire. What little plot was discernible related, as its title suggests, to a vanguard of "future men" dedicated to destroying the sun's tyranny over the Earth. Critics and historians (indeed, after the Russian Revolution, the artists themselves) debated whether Victory Over the Sun symbolized the futurists' belief in technology's superiority over nature, the emancipation of postindustrial humanity over folk superstition, a call to arms for Russia's future revolutionaries to overthrow the country's decadent czarists, or simply Russians' then-popular obsession with a series of solar eclipses visible in the country during 1912-14.<sup>2</sup> However, what is clear is that the creators of Victory Over the Sun shared the utopian sensibilities of so many in their generation of the Western avant-garde, buoyed by the belief that they might hasten the already zooming cultural changes brought on by the Industrial Revolution through imagining, and then depicting, what was "beyond," by way of work that conjured alternate realities. The performance sought to move its audiences into states of shock and outrage, but more importantly into the realization that they were not simply witnesses to but also agents of change in their rapidly changing new era. And, as with the 1913 original, the 1980 production became such a hot ticket that would-be audience members started fights and attacked the ushers in their efforts to get into the standing-room-only performances.

With its over-the-top aesthetics, political underpinnings, futuristic orientation, and zealous audiences, it is not surprising that Mothersbaugh and Casale identified with the production. "We wanted to *be* that,"

Mothersbaugh said.<sup>3</sup> And in 1980, his band DEVO was well on its way to launching a similar creative assault on mass audiences that would have been unfathomable to the futurists' generation. That May, DEVO had released its third album, Freedom of Choice, and within a year the single "Whip It" reached Billboard's Hot 100 chart, its ubiquity extended after the song's video was put in heavy rotation at the then content-starved new cable channel MTV. Mothersbaugh and Casale have claimed the song's cryptic lyrics are both an ironic take on the "power of positive thinking" mentality that would come to mark Ronald Reagan's "morning in America" after his election that year, and a sincere plea to progressives in the lead-up to what became Jimmy Carter's loss of the presidency. These lyrics were couched in an insanely catchy melody and dance-floor-ready beat that belied the band's entire endeavor: mockery of contemporary civilization's "de-evolution" into ignorance, mediocrity, conformity, pollution, and greed. Indeed, the ironic nature of both the song's political opacity and the video's appropriation of the sexuality, sexism, and racism of more typical MTV fare were arguably misread for the real thing in ways that allowed the song to become so popular in the first place.

DEVO had begun life nearly a decade earlier, as a performance art project much like *Victory Over the Sun*, and what appeared to be an overnight success in 1980 was in fact the result of a long and careful effort to revisit and revise the strategies of such art historical predecessors, at a moment when their ideas felt relevant again. While the band would construct a pointedly more pessimistic view of "the future" than their futurist predecessors in the early twentieth century, as the century sped to a close DEVO nonetheless saw in its own times the same need for politicized art, and the same sense of its potential. As such, while the scholars and artists contributing to this catalogue testify to Mothersbaugh's prescient engagements with "the future" throughout his career, I'd like to take a different tack here by speaking to how Mothersbaugh's futurism also relates to *the past*.

Benedetti discussed the resonance of Victory Over the Sun with artists such as Mothersbaugh, and he noticed, as the production traveled through the United States and Europe between 1980 and 1983, that "painters and musicians involved in the New Wave recognized the piece as a fountainhead of their tradition."<sup>4</sup> The director explained that the world of the futurists-on the verge of World War I, with decades of battle with totalitarian and fascist governments on the horizon, feeling both excitement and dread for a modern world hurtling toward an unknown future—was "frighteningly close to our own right now." In the early 1980s, the Cold War heated up with Reagan's rhetoric and policies, stoking fears of nuclear war (which led to the sensational 1983 TV movie The Day After, watched and anxiously discussed by nearly 100 million viewers); the news featured global famine and the newly named AIDS crisis. On a more positive note, Benedetti enthused, "It reminds me of the work of a rock group like DEVO," clearly seeing the kinship between the band's sophisticated, critical approach to these contemporary phenomena and that of the futurists decades earlier.<sup>5</sup>

Casale elaborated on how DEVO looked for guidance from these avantgarde predecessors: "Those guys laid down the twentieth century. All the ideas and themes that would play out for the rest of the century, they really did it."<sup>6</sup> Both Mothersbaugh and Casale had long been familiar with the history and work of the European modernists, having first discovered them (and each other) during their studies in the fine art program at Kent State University in their native Ohio. A decade before experiencing the uncanny resonance of Victory Over the Sun, Mothersbaugh was already becoming "influenced by agit-prop from Germany and Europe in the late 1920s and 1930s and Bauhaus, geometric shapes and the Italian Futurists and the Russian Suprematists," which he discovered when he began studying at Kent State in 1968.<sup>7</sup> Typical for such distinguished state universities in the Midwest, Kent State was what Mothersbaugh calls "an oasis" for students like him. He had grown up a scrawny, creative kid in the working-class environs of Akron, which revolved around the rubber manufacture that provided tires and belts for the American auto industry (centered in nearby Detroit), and where a college education seemed either out of reach or a pointless, pretentious luxury. To Mothersbaugh, the anonymity and opportunities at Kent State opened up a whole new world: "I'd never met people like this in my life in the Akron, Ohio, school system or, if they were there, they were hiding out. So, school changed for me overnight—it changed from the kind of thing I had nightmares about every night to all of a sudden finding out about the world of art. Filmmakers like Fellini and David Lynch were now on my horizons." Flush with excitement over these new influences and resources at Kent State, he would literally sleep in the printmaking studio after marathon poster- and sticker-making sessions, then plaster the campus with the results the following day.

In these years, avant-garde artists such as Allan Kaprow, Robert Smithson, and Morton Subotnick were at Kent State as visiting teachers and performers, enlivening the already buzzing campus with their presence and public, provocative work.<sup>8</sup> Mothersbaugh is also quick to credit Kent State professors such as the printmaker Ian Short, the writer Alex Gildzen, and the designer John Zabrucky for their encouragement of his creative gifts, and their willingness to collaborate with students in meaningful ways. (Indeed, some of DEVO's earliest performances and screenings took place alongside Gildzen's readings, and Zabrucky moved to Los Angeles around the same time as DEVO to found Modern Props; he offered his expertise in the band's development of costumes and sets.) The university's art programming and faculty reflected more broadly the growing sophistication of American fine arts education, which increasingly stressed not just classical material, but also recent art history—a phenomenon indebted to the modernist curriculum of Germany's Bauhaus academy,



The annual Creative Arts Festival at Kent State University exposed students to leading figures in the arts. The 1970 festival featured Alan Rich, John Ashbery, Allan Kaprow, Robert Smithson, Morton Subotnick, and John Vaccaro.



Oskar Schlemmer's most celebrated work at the Bauhaus school was the 1922 experimental performance *Triadic Ballet*. many of whose former faculty and graduates had emigrated to the United States after the Bauhaus was closed by the Nazi government in 1933 and introduced the school's principles into America's exponentially growing, post–World War II universities. (Any student who has ever been required to take "foundation" courses in art school has the Bauhaus to thank.)

During Mothersbaugh's first year at Kent State, a traveling exhibition marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Bauhaus's founding was touring the United States to great fanfare, revealing the ways American universities and art institutes were applying the school's blurring of lines between professors and students (at the Bauhaus, renamed "masters" and "apprentices," in recognition of their relationship as collaborators) as well as fine, performing, and applied arts.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, members of the Bauhaus community were not content to confine their ideas to the campus; from founder Walter Gropius's 1923 program for the school, it was written into the mission that collaboration with industry and popular audiences and markets would be a priority.<sup>10</sup> American universities' growing inclusion of design and craft curricula into their fine arts programs after World War II reflected this influence as well. At Kent State in particular, one can imagine that its status as a scrappy cultural "oasis"—centered in an industrial hub, far from the acknowledged cultural centers of the United Statesadditionally found inspiration in the Bauhaus school's having been nestled in and nurtured by the provincial factory town of Dessau, Germany.

The Bauhaus's boundary-spanning approach also embraced both music and theater. Indeed, the Bauhaus arguably considered performance to be the apex of what today we might refer to as its "multiplatform" ideal of creative "totality" and popular accessibility—in which a single concept comes together, or can be experienced from different angles, in a plethora of media. Performances ranged from the informal revelry of the students' Bauhaus jazz band performances to the futurist-inspired productions of Bauhaus professor Oskar Schlemmer's stage workshop. Schlemmer's most famous piece, Triadic Ballet, was an experimental work that originated more or less contemporaneously in Germany with Victory Over the Sun, although the entire ballet was not realized until 1922, with the help of the Bauhaus community.<sup>11</sup> In style and substance, *Triadic Ballet* reflects and builds on what Victory Over the Sun sought to achieve: Schlemmer's Triadic Ballet furthered Kruchenykh's often-nonsensical libretto by doing away with any language at all, as performers "spoke" with highly emotive gestures; Matiushin's score for Victory Over the Sun (whose intended majesty was undercut by its performance on a borrowed, out-of-tune piano) paled next to Paul Hindemith's precisely composed Triadic Ballet for player piano, emanating automatically from its mechanical roll, handpunched by the composer; and, most famously, Schlemmer outdid Malevich's astounding, abstract costumes by taking advantage of the Bauhaus's state-of-the-art metal and weaving workshops, producing wildly innovative masks and costuming whose aesthetic and materials truly reflected both productions' celebratory ideal of the "universal language" of industrial-age humanity. Unsurprisingly, documents pertaining to Schlemmer's teaching and stagecraft featured prominently in the 50 Years Bauhaus exhibition and catalogue.<sup>12</sup>

It is easy to look at stills from *Victory Over the Sun* and *Triadic Ballet* and see the direct influence of these art historical references upon DEVO's stagecraft and aesthetic. What is less obvious—especially to those with only a passing familiarity with DEVO as a "novelty band" or "one-hit wonder"—is the intelligence behind DEVO's application of these influences.



From the band's earliest uses and manipulation of mass-produced, industrial uniforms (procured from Casale's day job post-graduation as a graphic designer for a janitorial supply company) to their eventual production of the elaborate costumes worn and fan merchandise sold since the band's heyday (from ideas originating in Mothersbaugh's Kent State advertising-arts classes), DEVO clearly sought to cultivate a unified image of industrial, space-age modernity inspired by these modernist predecessors. The most recognizable of these DEVO props, the bright-red, stair-step "energy domes"—debuted on the cover of Freedom of Choice and worn in their career-making "Whip It" video—are an excellent case in point. Modeled after futurist and Bauhaus costumes, as well as these movements' interests in ancient abstraction seen in iconic structures such as Mesopotamian ziggurats and Aztec temples, they represented the power of humanity in concert with the cosmos so frequently and even hubristically referenced in modernist touchstones such as Victory Over the Sun and Triadic Ballet.

Interestingly, the hubris at the heart of many utopian groups such as the futurists and the Bauhaus is frequently referenced in another of Mothersbaugh's art historical influences, Dada. The impact of the Kent State shootings in May 1970—both the outrage they sparked, and the surprising complacency that affected American youth politics in its wake—has been much discussed as a catalyst to Mothersbaugh's and Casale's formation of what would become DEVO. Indeed, Mothersbaugh has said that the campus's temporary closure, and the resulting time off and lack of resources and studio space, led the two to turn to music as

The futuristic outfits and quirky staging of a glant rubber ball in the background of this Warner Bros. promotional photograph echo the aesthetics of *Triadic Ballet*.





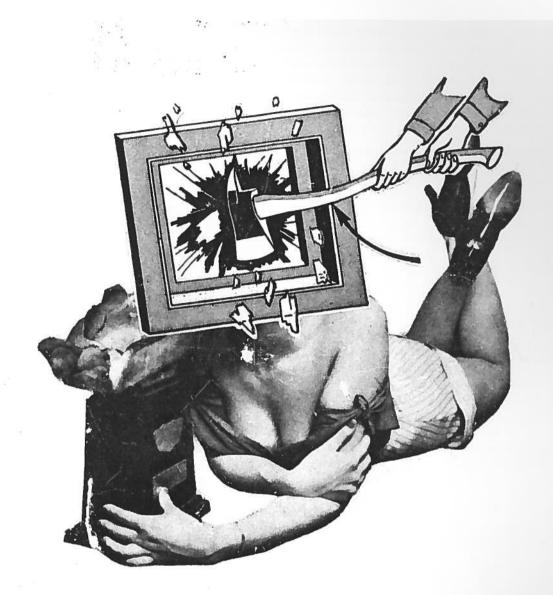
### top:

Raoul Hausmann. The Spirit of Our Time (Mechanical Head), 1919

above: Hannah Höch. *Das schöne Madchen* [Beautiful Girl], 1920 a logical collaborative "medium" they could practice in their spartan apartments as they tried to make sense of the events. "We started talking about what was going on in the world, and decided we weren't seeing evolution, but de-evolution," as they marveled at the conformity and apathy of American support of the war and lost faith in the promise of the counterculture. Onto this foundation, they collaged the lowbrow cultural heritage of the postwar popular culture they both grew up with—comic books, sci-fi films, and rock and roll, along with the 1924 religious tract *Jocko-Homo Heavenbound* from which their "de-evolutionary" philosophy was first derived—into what Casale called "a creative whacked-out Dada art response" to the situation.<sup>13</sup>

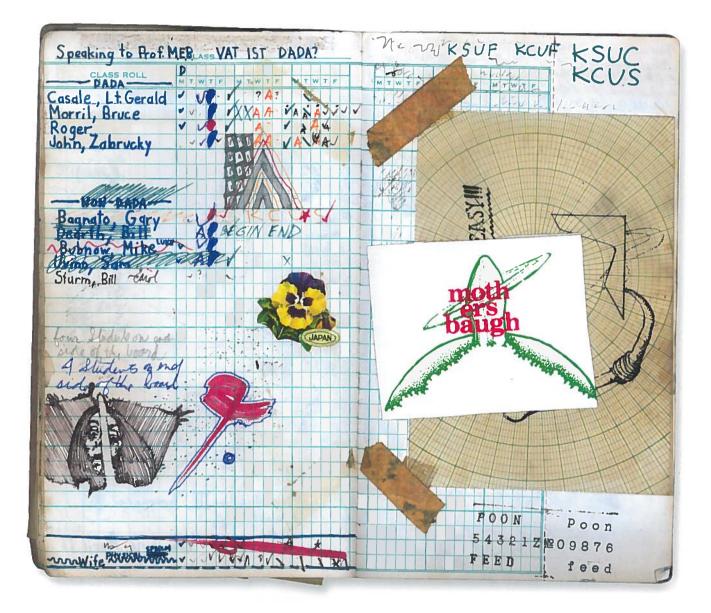
That Dada was on their minds was no coincidence. In 1968, another much-discussed traveling exhibition opened that presented the flip side of Bauhaus utopianism to American audiences. Organized by New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage sought to recuperate the largely dismissed Dada movement to make sense of then-emergent movements of the 1960s—such as pop art and the related, countercultural comix and zine movements—by looking back to this alternate trajectory of modern art history.<sup>14</sup> As Casale's comment suggests, Dada was an especially potent influence on DEVO's formationbut also, as we will see, more broadly on Mothersbaugh's creative development. In particular, Dada's equal-opportunity critical eye appealed to his feeling similarly sandwiched between conservative reactionaries and a naively positivist avant-garde. The Dada movement was born of the same progressive ideas as futurism, but also of disgust over the warmongering sensibility that led many futurists to blindly follow the status quo into World War I—a war that, as Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage curator William S. Rubin wrote, confirmed to Dada "the bankruptcy of nineteenth-century bourgeois rationalism" in which both conservatives and futurists had such faith.<sup>15</sup>

Originating in the neutral cities of Zurich and New York at the war's start, Dada's founders resembled Mothersbaugh's generation of draft dodgers, deserters, and pacifists who had experienced not the heroics and high-tech destruction that futurist writing and art had promised them, but the realities of the muddy trenches where soldiers were all too human.<sup>16</sup> Before World War I, Victory Over the Sun championed humanity's waging war against the cosmos itself, certain of "future men's" ability to rise like an industrial phoenix from the rubble. After the war, however, Dada artists mocked the futurists' naïveté and blind faith in technology via works such as Raoul Hausmann's The Spirit of Our Time (1919). Here, Hausmann replaces the heroism of Malevich's "future men" with the blank, mute wooden head of a wigmaker's dummy, "modernized" with bits and pieces of impressive-looking but useless industrial detritus. Hausmann's contemporary Hannah Höch famously applied this same concept to her photomontages—arguably creating what we still consider the "Dada style" in the process. She proposed something of a female counterpart to Hausmann's The Spirit of Our Time in her contemporaneous Beautiful Girl (1920), where uniformly sexy, blank young women-with eyeless faces and lightbulb heads-are pieced together like robots, then roll off the assembly line like cars ready for the marketplace. While their Bauhaus contemporaries continued to tinker with new, peacetime possibilities for the futurist "beyond," Dada seemed to sneer ironically, pointing to the empty-headed, polluted present: BEHOLD! Our heroic future is NOW!



In its review of the exhibition and catalogue, *Leonardo* magazine summarized the resonance of MoMA's 1968 Dada exhibition to artists in those heady days: "Today we are living a similar situation. We are on the brink of self-destruction which may come about suddenly by violence or slowly by the poisons with which we are polluting our environment. [...] But there is a growing wave of protest in the air, and, though this has not yet found any organized outlet through a coherent group [...] many artists are demonstrating an increasing desire to say something with their art."<sup>17</sup> Coming into his own as an artist at precisely this moment, it is unsurprising that Mothersbaugh would find connections between the Dada era and his own, which are reflected in his early artwork. In much of his student work, one sees his Dada-inspired collage style, where the detritus of pop culture is juxtaposed in such a way that its well-scrubbed facade gives way to grotesque, scatological, and hypersexualized manipulations that suggest an ugly primitivism under the surface. In one 1972 collage, Mothersbaugh

Mothersbaugh's early collage works are heavily influenced by the visual language of Dada artists such as Raoul Hausmann and Hannah Höch. Mark Mothersbaugh. SEXI-LUV, 1972



In this 1971 journal page, Mothersbaugh categorizes his friends and professors as "DADA" and "NON-DADA." Mark Mothersbaugh. *Riggs' Class Record No. 101 (No D)* (pages 14 and 15), 1971 even updates the Dada Beautiful Girl for the Vietnam era as a voluptuous pinup girl, overflowing shopping bag in hand, whose empty-frame head is being smashed—whether in destructive glee or fearful response is unclear—by a disembodied pair of hands swinging an axe. Another evocative comparison to Höch's Dada sensibility is apparent in one of the typically packed pages from Mothersbaugh's student notebooks, where he actually poses, then answers, the question "VAT IST DADA?" by taking "class roll," counting artist and musician friends as students of "DADA" (among them his young professor Zabrucky and "Lt. Gerald Casale," earning an A!) versus "NON-DADA" classmates and acquaintances he now remembers as largely "clueless," in much the same way as Höch had sorted her world into the forces of "Dada" vs. the "anti-Dadas" fifty years earlier in her most famous collage, Cut with the Kitchen Knife (1919-20).<sup>18</sup> Dada was clearly on Mothersbaugh's radar early in his studies. He associated himself with the movement's critical style, jarring cut-and-paste aesthetics, and us-against-the-world clubbiness, which is seen throughout the pages of his journals and class notes during his student years, and which would eventually spill over into the DNA of DEVO-fusing perhaps most clearly in the content of his DEVO alter ego Booji Boy's stream-of-consciousness pseudo-manifesto, My Struggle, Booji Boy, later in the decade.

The Dada movement's flattening of distinctions between high art and the lowbrow was another pertinent influence for Mothersbaugh. By the early 1970s, he was busy finding parallels between his own experiences and those of the seemingly far-off world of the modernists. Similarly, was he making connections between his pop cultural education growing up in Akron and his new discoveries as a student of fine-art history. He recalled this moment as one of "trying to create all these affinities between what we knew and loved, and art, and what we were learning at school." Juxtaposing art historical references alongside starlets from movie magazines, horrifying medical illustrations with the comforts of home, or bohemian friends with politicians on the world stage, the leveling and unifying power of Dada's collage style became a mainstay of Mothersbaugh's studio practice. Influential, too, were the ways in which Dada's juxtapositions often suggest the disorienting, destructive realities of the industrial world, as well as the ways in which that world functions by repressing the more base elements of human nature—which often return with a vengeance. Mothersbaugh's notebooks abound with what he called "corrections" of found imagery, and the media in which he made and translated his earliest visual artwork-collage, stamps, stickers, prints, and booklets-were the same easily accessible and reproducible media Dada artists had chosen specifically to bring their sophisticated critique of mass culture to the masses themselves.

Indeed, on this last point both Dada and Mothersbaugh intersected with the more utopian modernists that Dada so often critiqued. They all ultimately had great faith in using the strategies of branding and advertising to get messages out to the masses, especially when those messages went against or undermined the status quo—to potentially change minds by first changing fashions. Music, theater, film, and publications were embraced not simply for their own sake—as "total works of art" that brought together multiple media for a multisensory experience—but just as much for their Trojan-horse potential in getting progressive ideas to unsuspecting audiences.<sup>19</sup> These movements influential to Mothersbaugh were masters of branding as much as manifestos: the sold-out performances of *Victory Over the Sun* were the result of weeks of futurist advertisements, street parades, and breathless press accounts resulting from these exploits; the Bauhaus curriculum revolved around partnerships with industry and accessing popular audiences with their products and productions; and Dada artists documented, published, and performed their work in books, plays, magazines, and even films aimed at cultivating a wide international following. This strategy was brilliantly summarized by the modernist playwright Bertolt Brecht when, on the verge of World War II, in his essay "Popularity and Realism" he called on his avant-garde contemporaries to seek a place in popular culture to counter the propaganda of the fascists on the rise in Europe. Brecht reminded artists: "There is not only such a thing as *being popular*, there is also the process of *becoming popular*," and he reiterated his generation's need to take up agitprop strategies that would awaken the masses to their power as agents of change, rather than simply consumers of the familiar.<sup>20</sup>

As all these influences were coalescing in Mothersbaugh's development as an artist, he would find his first opportunity to step out into a truly multiplatform expression, and eventually reach the kinds of contemporary audiences few of his predecessors could have dreamed of, when his studio practice expanded to include DEVO. While the band's impressive musical chops were the result of its members' longtime studies and practice of music—Mothersbaugh actually began learning to play the organ around the age of six-DEVO was perhaps most influenced by Casale's and Mothersbaugh's more recent and intensive studies of art and art history. Though the band first existed as a live act, Mothersbaugh insists—and period footage of their theatrical, confrontational early sets seems to confirm—that DEVO was predominantly a performance art project, driven by the ironic, underlying philosophy of "de-evolution" that has persistently guided DEVO as a collaborative work to this day. DEVO's music and lyrics have always revolved around the tension between an enthusiasm for technology's empowering, intellectual potential and a skepticism about whether humanity has demonstrated an enlightened application of these technologies that rises above our baser instincts. But their music has also always revolved around and interacted with a multimedia aspect, from its fundamental "Devolutionary Oath" to its often tightly choreographed performances to its pseudo-corporate entity, "DEVO Inc." Nearly a decade before MTV's existence, the band had films, videos, and elaborate graphic identities for nearly all of its earliest recordings; Mothersbaugh maintains that the musical, visual, and performative aspects could not be pulled apart, or even understood independently from one another.

By the time their 1976 film *In the Beginning Was the End: The Truth about De-Evolution* began traveling the country as part of an anthology of award-winning shorts in 1977, punk rock had broken into the mainstream consciousness, and pop culture began to catch up with DEVO's sound and concept. True Midwesterners, the band somehow fit between the cool, arty new wave scene in New York and San Francisco's grungy *Search & Destroy* community. They also broke out of Ohio fully formed: They had been writing songs and honing their experimental live performances since their earliest, free-jazz-inspired days in the wake of the Kent State shootings (one of the earliest versions of DEVO actually opened for Sun Ra's Arkestra), and Mothersbaugh and Casale took full advantage of their backgrounds in art to hype their shows with impressive-looking posters, photography, films, and alter egos that took the punk scene's do-it-yourself ethos to new heights. In punk's audiences (at now-legendary venues such as CBGB in New York and the Mabuhay Gardens in San Francisco), DEVO also found a community who—with their amalgamation of rebellion, frustration, and agency—understood the band's critiques and contradictions, and served as a springboard toward the mass audiences who discovered them in the next decade.

This DIY, punk image is at once undergirded by an artful theatricality inspired by its futurist-inspired predecessors—especially in regard to DEVO's genuine technological breakthroughs in electronic instruments, music production, and live performance—and tempered by a Dada-inspired silliness that critiques the same. In the years since its start, DEVO has utilized art, film and video, advertisements, publications, merchandising, video games, and even mail art between the band and its press and fans as different media platforms, through which Mothersbaugh has expressed and stretched DEVO's various messages about the pleasures of our modern world, mixed with a revulsion over their misuses. In this, there is a jarring sense of contradiction available to those willing to look under the hood of DEVO's seemingly earnest, machine-like facade. The music critic Simon Reynolds recalled how the band burst onto the international music scene in the late 1970s: "It's quite hard to recapture just how grotesque and twisted and defective those early DEVO singles sounded-the herky-jerky rhythms, the shrill chants."<sup>21</sup> And this "grotesque and twisted and defective" element is very much on display in photographs of the band performing their sweaty, provocative, occasionally violent sets at clubs in the late 1970s, or in lyrics to singles such as "Jocko Homo," "Uncontrollable Urge," and "Girl U Want," where the messiness of human nature fairly oozes out from cracks in the music's precise, mechanical framework. Ultimately, as the scholar Leah Dickerman wrote of Dada's similar strategies, in Mothersbaugh's work "the grotesque body as that which resists discipline and control" wins the day, regardless of our desires to govern it.<sup>22</sup> Looking at footage of Mothersbaugh's performance style—ranging from his multiple characters in The Truth about De-Evolution and early videos (like DEVO's cover of "Satisfaction," where he oscillates between playing the twitchy manmachine performing the song and the louche teenage lothario acting out its lyrics), to his recent role as the dotty, beret-wearing "art professor" for the preschool audiences of Nickelodeon's Yo Gabba Gabba!, and of course his ongoing embodiment of the "infantile spirit of de-evolution," DEVO mascot Booji Boy—it is clear that, while obviously relishing the opportunity to play, he has also taken quite seriously his investment in going full-out physically as a performer as well as intellectually as a conceptual driver of the work he has done over the last four decades.

These, I believe, are the kinds of tensions foregrounded in Mothersbaugh's visual art in this exhibition, and examining them may help audiences more fully comprehend his better-known work as a musician and composer. On many levels, the sleek, industrial look of his more popinspired work—such as the uncanny, large-scale distortions of his My Little Pony sculptures—continues the deadpan critique for which he first became famous in DEVO. But the bulk of the work on display in this exhibition demonstrates a different and often surprisingly personal sensibility. This work is much closer to—indeed, in his postcard journals, is arguably an extension of—the messy stream of consciousness on display in his earliest notebooks and *My Struggle*. Here, Mothersbaugh's drippy, hand-rendered figures and texts jostle for dominance with the angularity and neatness of the industrial world, and the artist quite openly (if guiltily) implicates himself in the debasement of culture, the environment, and even other



Even with the 1981 New Traditionalists album, when DEVO's image became more uniform in terms of perfectly matching costumes and identical poses, Booji Boy represented freedom and change. people that his work with DEVO might seem to suggest he considered himself "above." The visual art counters the confidence of the musical work with a vulnerability and deep ambivalence about the roles of progress, technology, consumerism, individuality, and community, which I would argue has always been trembling at the edges of his best-known work, but has never been so clearly on display. In this way, *Myopia* reveals unexpected facets of both Mothersbaugh's vision and his twentieth-century influences—leading, perhaps, back to a new future for how we understand Mothersbaugh's own influence on artists in this century.

- 1 The catalogue for the exhibition documents both the difficulty of finding and bringing together the works in the show, given the decades of repressive Soviet rule that marked the country's history after 1930, as well as the excitement generated over LACMA's ability to do so fifty years later. See Stephanie Barron and Maurice Tuchman, eds., *The Avant-Garde in Russia*, 1910–1930: New Perspectives (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1980). The show subsequently traveled to the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC, where it also included performances of Benedetti's Victory Over the Sun.
- 2 See the several scholarly perspectives in the excellent volume recently published to honor the play's centenary: Rosamund Bartlett and Sarah Dadswell, eds., Victory Over the Sun: The World's First Futurist Opera (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2012).
- 3 Mark Mothersbaugh, interview by Maria Elena Buszek, June 14, 2013, at Mutato Muzika, Los Angeles. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Mothersbaugh are from this interview.
- 4 Robert Benedetti, "Reconstructing Victory Over the Sun," TDR: The Drama Review 28, no. 3 (1984): 29. Benedetti's production was later revived during the exhibition's restaging at the Hirshhorn, at festivals in Berlin and Amsterdam, and as part of the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival.
- 6 Harlow Robinson, "Russia's Cubo-Futurists Created a Startling 'Opera," New York Times, November 20, 1983.
- 6 Gerald Casale, interview, Totally Wired: Postpunk Interviews and Overviews, ed. Simon Reynolds (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2010), 46.
- 7 Brad Warner, "Are we not men? We are STILL DEVO!: Interview with Mark Mothersbaugh," November 11, 2009, https://suicidegirls.com/ members/brad\_warner/blog/2680176/q-are-wenot-men-a-we-are-still-devo/.
- 8 See Kevin C. Smith's discussion of these artists' participation in Kent State "happenings" in Recombo DNA: The Story of DEVO, or How the 60s Became the 80s (London: Jawbone, 2013), Part I.
- See the first English edition of 50 Years Bauhaus, ed. Wulf Herzogenrath (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1968). The exhibition opened in Stuttgart, Germany, and was shown at ten museums throughout the world, including American stops in Chicago and Pasadena, between 1968 and 1970. The international interest in the exhibition led to the then-homeless Bauhaus Archive's move to Berlin. In 1976 the archive began building the Bauhaus Archive Museum in which it is housed today.

- 10 See Walter Gropius, "Program of the Staatliche Bauhaus in Weimar" (1923), in Bauhaus: Weimar, Dessau, Berlin, Chicago, ed. Hans Wingler (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978), 31–33.
- 11 In his essay on Bauhaus theater theory, "Theater, Circus, Variety," faculty member László Moholy-Nagy specifically historicizes the school's approach via futurism and Dada. See Walter Gropius, ed., The Theater of the Bauhaus (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 49–70.
- 12 With the benefit of subsequent decades of discoveries from and research into the Bauhaus, Schlemmer and the central place of the Theater Workshop in Bauhaus history have been addressed in these recent exhibitions and catalogues: Barry Bergdoll et al., Bauhaus 1919-1933: Workshops for Modernity (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2009) and Kathleen James Chakraborty et al., Bauhaus: Art as Life (London: Barbican Art Gallery, 2012).
- 13 Casale interview, 43.
- See William S. Rubin, Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1968).
  Rubin, 12.
- 16 See Dennis Crockett, German Post-Expressionism: The Art of the Great Disorder, 1918-1924 (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1999). For a snapshot of how this perspective played out in Europe's "art capital" during these years, and how widespread this sensibility was between the world wars, see Kenneth E. Silver, Esprit de Corps: The Art of the Parisian Avant-Garde and the First World War, 1914-1925 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).
- 17 Norman Narotzky, *Leonardo* 3, no. 3 (1970): 367.
- 18 Mark Mothersbaugh, email message to author, July 30, 2013.
- 19 The phrase itself was derived from Richard Wagner's theory of the Gesamtkunstwerk, celebrated and modernized in the early twentieth century by all the modernist movements discussed here. See Wagner, "The Art Work of the Future" (1849), excerpted in Art in Theory 1815-1900, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood with Jason Gaiger (London: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 471-78.
- 20 Bertolt Brecht, "Popularity and Realism" (1938), in Art in Theory 1900-2000, 2nd ed., eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (London: Blackweil Publishing, 2003), 502.
- 21 Simon Reynolds, Totally Wired: Postpunk Interviews and Overviews (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2009), 46, 82.
- 22 Leah Dickerman, "Dada Gambits," October 105 (summer 2003): 11.