

# AIR GUITAR

DAVE HICKEY



Essays on Art & Democracy

## THE DELICACY OF ROCK-AND-ROLL

In the mid nineteen sixties, when I was attending the University of Texas at Austin, Thursday nights were “Underground Flick Nite” at the Y on the Drag. The movies were supposed to start promptly at 7:00 P.M., but the projectionist was also a dedicated revolutionary, so they never really started until the New Left cabals, which also met at the Y, had adjourned for the day. So we always went. After a hot afternoon plotting the destruction of bourgeois society—and barring some previously scheduled eruption of spontaneous civil disobedience—Flick Nite was sort of radicals’ night out. Imagine *Mystery Science Theater 3000* with a hot Texas *mise en scène*: The clatter of the projector in the glimmering darkness. Smoke curling up through the silvered ambiance. Insects swooping. The ongoing murmur of impudent commentary from the audience. References to Althusser, Marcuse, group sex. Like that.

On the evening I want to tell you about, the evening I experienced the paradigm shift, the program began with a couple of Stan Brakhage films. I don’t remember the titles but they might be characterized thematically as “very nervous” and sort of about “film itself.” As I recall, there was a great deal of panning, swooping, jiggling, dipping, and zooming—a great many explosions (the “film itself” seeming to catch on fire, at one point)—and, overall, a bit more montage than I would have preferred. A young woman sitting in front of me in the darkness kept waving her cigarette languidly on the pivot of her wrist and muttering, “Boy, boy, boy, boy, boy, boy, boy,” in a very bored voice.

She had a point. I can imagine these films coming back into vogue now, in this revisionist *momento macho*. Today, they would be minimalist action flicks—*Die Hard* sans Bruce Willis. Back then, they were the same old apocalypse—kinetic action paintings. People tended to mention Jackson Pollock when they talked about them. They were doing this when the second half of Flick Nite began—and we thought Brakhage was dull! In this new flick, the camera just *sat there*, trained on this guy who just sat

there, too, sideways to the camera in a chair, like Whistler's mother's gay nephew, getting a haircut. That was it. The barber was out of the frame. All we saw were his hands, the scissors, and the comb, fluttering around this guy's head. *Clip-clip! Clip-clip-clip!*

We couldn't fucking believe it. This was *really* boring. Mesmerizing, too, of course, but not mesmerizing enough to keep us from moaning, keening almost, and swaying in our chairs. *Clip-clip!* But we kept looking at the screen even though we knew, after the first minute, that this was going to be it: that it was just a guy getting a haircut. Still, we watched, and it just went on and on. *Clip! Clip-clip-clip!* In truth, it was no more than five or six minutes, but that's a long time in a movie, approximately the length of a Siberian winter. So, I began thinking about *theory*. "What about the *clip-clip* of the scissors and the *clip-clip* of the projector?" I wondered. "The analogy of the 'actual' and 'represented' white noise? What about that?"

Then it happened. The guy getting the haircut reached into his shirt pocket, pulled out a pack of cigarettes and casually lit one up! *Major action!* Applause. Tumultuous joy and release! Chanting even. And the joy may have been ironic (it almost certainly was), but the release was quite genuine. I remember every instant of Henry lighting up that cigarette and the laughter I could not suppress. Because it was fun, and amazing to realize how seriously you had been fucked with. The haircut continued at that point (*clip-clip!*), but we were alive now. Fifteen minutes earlier we had been dozing through Brakhage's visual Armageddon. Now we were cheering for some guy lighting a Lucky Strike.

Clearly, Mr. Warhol was onto something here. It was stupid, but it was miraculous, too. His film had totally recalibrated the perceptions of a roomful of sex-crazed adolescent revolutionaries into a field of tiny increments. It had restored the breath and texture to things and then, with the flip of a Zippo, had given us a little bang in the bargain—and by accident, I have no doubt. We all knew, of course, that the events in a work of art are only large or small relative to one another, but our bodies had forgotten. Our bodies had become inured to explosions. The delicate increments of individual response needed to be reinscribed, and *Haircut* did

that. When the lights came up, we were all looking at one another with new eyes.

“There has got to be some political application,” the projectionist said to me as we stood around on the porch, finishing our beer. I doubted it, but I didn’t say so, because I wanted to see more Warhol flicks, and I feared that once the critical instrumentalities of dialectical materialism were unleashed upon *Haircut*, it would become only too clear that Andy’s film dissolved the idea of history and narrative into something tinier, more complicated and contingent. And for us, at that time, there were no politics without history. Politics *were* history—and vice versa—although, in truth, I found myself preferring the political morality of Warhol’s film to Brakhage’s. It was sadder and funnier, too.

Today, I know this wasn’t quite fair to Brakhage, but at that moment the rhetoric of expressionist freedom had reached the point of rapidly diminishing returns. It just wasn’t working anymore. I think I was correct, however, in assuming that Brakhage’s practice (if it was not purely formal) was essentially tragic. His films strove toward a condition of freedom and autonomy, fully aware that the work itself, for all its abstract materiality, could never free itself from cultural expectations. Nor could the artist, for all the aleatory and improvisatory privileges he granted himself, free his practice from the traditions of picture-making. So, no matter how much you admired Brakhage’s bird-on-a-wire lungings toward existential freedom, you had to admit, finally, that all the energy was in the wire.

Warhol’s film turned that energy on its head. Warhol could not *invent* enough wires, nor try hard enough to impose normative simplicity—to avoid freedom at all costs—nor fail more spectacularly. The static camera, the static subject, the idiot narrative armature, the tiny non-individuated events (*clip-clip!*), only served to theatricalize the inherent imperfection and disorder of the endeavor, only served to foreground the sheer, silly ebullient *muchness* of the image moving in time. Thus, Warhol’s self-inhibiting strategies liberated him as an artist and liberated his beholders, as well, into an essentially comic universe.

Brakhage told us what we already knew as children of the Cold War, that no matter how hard we tried, we could not be free—thus inviting us, paradoxically, into the rigors of utopian political orthodoxy. Warhol's film, on the other hand, told us what we needed to know, that, no matter how hard we tried, we could not be ordered—that insofar as we were tiny, raggedy, damaged and disorganized human beings, we probably *were* free, in some small degree, whether we liked it or not. All of this is probably self-evident to anyone who has lived through the past thirty years. The effect of these films on me, on that hot, Texas night, however, was nothing short of cataclysmic.

I knew, you see, that my encounter with Brakhage and Warhol was not, in any sense, a “high art” experience. It couldn't have been. I didn't know anything about high art—I knew about radical politics, jazz, rock-and-roll, and linguistics—and understanding this, then, I have gradually come to distrust the very *idea* of high art in a democracy. I mean, what would it be like? Aristocratic cultures have a high and low. They have higher-ups and lower-downs, and consequently they may, on occasion, create a socially engaged, commercially disinterested high art that trickles down to instruct and inform the “lower orders.” In a mercantile democracy, however, the only refuge from the marketplace is in the academy. So democracies, I fear, must content themselves with commercial, popular art that informs the culture and noncommercial, academic art that critiques it—with the caveat that, even though most popular art exploits the vernacular, some popular art redeems it—even though it's still for sale.

To reach this conclusion, I asked myself these questions: Is a painting by Jackson Pollock or a film by Stan Brakhage high art? Yes? Well, if so, could the art of Pollock or Brakhage exist without the imprimatur of Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker? Could I have understood it without its being informed by the cultural context of American jazz? Without the free-form exuberance of bebop? My answer: No way, José. And, conversely, could bebop exist without Jackson Pollock and Stan Brakhage? You betcha. And could rock-and-roll exist without Warhol? Yep. And could Andy Warhol exist without rock-and-roll? I don't think so. These answers, of course, tend to confirm my own predisposition to regard recorded popular music as the

dominant art form of this American century. My point is that Pollock and Warhol do not exploit the lumpen vernacular, they redeem it—elevating its eccentricities into the realm of public discourse. As a consequence, the work of Pollock and Warhol, like that of Rembrandt or Dickens or David, is the best that popular, commercial art can be—doing the best things it can do.

So now I think of that evening in Texas as marking the end of the Age of Jazz and the beginning of the Age of Rock-and-Roll—the end of tragic theater in American popular culture and the beginning of comic delicacy. Both ages make art that succeeds by failing, but each exploits failure in different ways. Jazz presumes that it would be nice if the four of us—simpatico dudes that we are—while playing this complicated song together, might somehow be free and autonomous as well. Tragically, this never quite works out. At best, we can only be free one or two at a time—while the other dudes hold onto the wire. Which is not to say that no one has tried to dispense with wires. Many have, and sometimes it works—but it doesn't feel like *jazz* when it does. The music simply drifts away into the stratosphere of formal dialectic, beyond our social concerns.

Rock-and-roll, on the other hand, presumes that the four of us—as damaged and anti-social as we are—might possibly get it *to-fucking-gether*, man, and play this simple song. And play it right, okay? Just this once, in tune and on the beat. But we can't. The song's too simple, and we're too complicated and too excited. We try like hell, but the guitars distort, the intonation bends, and the beat just moves, imperceptibly, against our formal expectations, whether we want it to or not. Just because we're *breathing*, man. Thus, in the process of trying to play this very simple song together, we create this hurricane of noise, this infinitely complicated, fractal filigree of delicate distinctions.

And you can thank the wanking eighties, if you wish, and digital sequencers, too, for proving to everyone that technologically “perfect” rock—like “free” jazz—sucks rockets. Because order sucks. I mean, look at the Stones. Keith Richards is *always* on top of the beat, and Bill Wyman, until he quit, was always behind it, because Richards is leading the band and

Charlie Watts is listening to him and Wyman is listening to Watts. So the beat is sliding on those tiny neural lapses, not so you can tell, of course, but so you can feel it in your stomach. And the intonation is wavering, too, with the pulse in the finger on the amplified string. This is the delicacy of rock-and-roll, the bodily rhetoric of tiny increments, necessary imperfections, and contingent community. And it has its virtues, because jazz only works if we're trying to be free and are, in fact, together. Rock-and-roll works because we're all a bunch of flakes. That's something you can *depend* on, and a good thing too, because in the twentieth century, that's all there is: jazz and rock-and-roll. The rest is term papers and advertising.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dave Hickey has written for most major American cultural publications, a great many minor ones, and some publications that are not cultural at all. He was owner-director of A Clean Well-Lighted Place Gallery in Austin, Texas, and director of Reese Palley Gallery in New York. He has served as Executive Editor for *Art in America* magazine in New York, as Staff Songwriter for Glaser Publications in Nashville, and as Arts Editor for the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*. In 1989, SMU Press published *Prior Convictions*, a volume of his short fiction, and, in 1993, Art issues Press published *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty*, which was reissued in 2011 in an expanded version by the University of Chicago Press. Hickey received the Frank Jewett Mather Award for Distinction in Art Criticism in 1994 and is currently Distinguished Professor of Criticism at the University of New Mexico. He lives in Albuquerque with his wife Libby Lumpkin.



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