

Seth Kim-Cohen

AUDIO VISUAL ARTS

KILL “KILL YOUR IDOLS.” YEAH YEAH YEAHS, LIARS, BLACK DICE: WHATEVER. TRULY RADICAL ANTI-ROCK. LIKE A CINDER BLOCK FROM THE 10TH STORY WINDOW. GROOVES. SLASHING GUITARS. FED UP SAMPLERS. TAKE DOWN THE CORPORATACRACY. ANY GENDER, AGE, RACE, PROFICIENCY. Seth Kim-Cohen’s classified ad, headed POST-POSTPUNK, NEW NO WAVE, defines its territory in strident but slippery terms, adopting a defiant pose while leaving room for interpretation. Originally posted in the “Musicians” section of Craigslist, then displayed outside Audio Visual Arts for the duration of Kim-Cohen’s “social-situational project” “Tomorrow Is the Question? Is the Question!,” the listing is one of several offering free rehearsal space to players for whom its proposition strikes a chord.

Kim-Cohen, a former member of the bands Number One Cup and the Fire Show, and the author of *In the Blink of an Ear: Toward a Non-Cochlear Sonic Art* (2009), pitched his altruistic gesture as a way of acting as midwife to new kinds of music by first describing them verbally, imagining new subgenres into being through the power of suggestion. The tiny gallery was equipped only with microphones, amplifiers, speakers, and a drum kit; everything else was left to the musicians, who were each granted two-and-a-half-hour slots. What they did with this time, and whether or not they attempted to realize the artist’s fanciful characterizations, was left entirely up to them. The organizer remained absent throughout, though the sessions were recorded with a vinyl release in mind.

When I stopped by, “post-postpunk” was in the process of being invented by a drummer/keyboardist, a guitarist, and a singer, none of whom once took a break to speak or crack a smile. It was unclear whether this was a band, or even if the three young men had met each other prior to setup. The beat was slow but shifting, the other instrumentation a wash of fuzzy strumming and electronic bumbles. The warbling vocals, which mixed real and invented language in (very approximately) the vein of Cocteau Twins’ Elizabeth Fraser, were easily the most striking ingredient. After half an hour or so, the anonymous trio was joined by an affable bass player, who introduced himself around, seeming to assume that I, the sole spectator, was another musician awaiting my turn.

Something about this encounter felt emblematic of the show as a whole; it was at once collegial and awkward, a real-world mistake framed by a semifictitious context. By emptying the gallery of what the press release refers to as “yesterday’s answers” in the form of completed artifacts, “Tomorrow Is the Question?” (the title is borrowed from a 1959 album by Ornette Coleman) transformed the ordinary room into an arena for trial and error that positioned improvisational performance as an allegory for experimental thinking in general. Kim-Cohen’s ads—others in the sequence cite FREAKTRONICA/DUB FOLK/TRIP BOP, LONG-ATTENTION-SPAN-MUSIC-FOR-SHORT-ATTENTION-SPAN-TIMES, and KRAUT-SOUL!—hew close enough to existing categories to ensure ready communication, but just far enough to allow for entertainingly divergent readings. These are directions that begin from fixed points but point outward to unknown territory, their phrasing playing with scene-y vocabulary and reference but allowing for an active reality that certainly doesn’t stop there.

Glancing out of AVA’s window during my hour-long visit, I clocked another full band with equipment in tow hungrily eying the space. The real estate that “Tomorrow Is the Question?” represented is in perennial demand, but here, albeit briefly, it was available for the taking.

—Michael Wilson



Seth Kim-Cohen,
KRAUT-SOUL!, 2012.
Performance view,
March 31, 2012.