

The Cowboy's Dreams of Home, the seventh Blank Forms anthology, takes its name from a psychedelic Wild West reverie of Texan singer-songwriter and visual artist Terry Allen. This volume privileges new texts, including a retrospective interview with Allen conducted by curator Anthony Elms; a conversation between multidisciplinary writers—and longtime friends—Thulani Davis and Jessica Hagedorn to mark the publication of the latest collection of Davis's poems; a discussion between composer Sarah Hennies and cellist Judith Hamann about a recent collaboration; and a dialogue between composer-performers Charles Curtis and Tashi Wada on Curtis's career-spanning compilation album. Each of these interviews shed light on the particularities of the artists' careers and methods in terms that are at once formal and casual, practical and theoretical.

Additionally, this book features new reflections on three artists that Blank Forms has recently published or programmed: the legendary jazz percussionist and healer Milford Graves, considered by Ciarán Finlayson; the UK-based experimental music trio Still House Plants, profiled by Joe Bucciero; and English multimedia artist Graham Lambkin, whose beguiling 2011 album *Amateur Doubles* is discussed by Alan Licht. New and archival works of and on poetry complement these interviews and essays, including rare texts by Davis, Hagedorn, and René Daumal, the latter translated by Louise Landes Levi, and a suite of Auto-Mythological writings commissioned from Chicago-based composer and musician Angel Bat Dawid.

Edited by Lawrence Kumpf and Joe Bucciero with contributions by Angel Bat Dawid, Joe Bucciero, Charles Curtis, René Daumal, Thulani Davis, Anthony Elms, Ciarán Finlayson, Jessica Hagedorn, Judith Hamann, Sarah Hennies, Louise Landes Levi, Alan Licht, Tashi Wada.



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THE COWBOY'S DREAMS OF HOME



THE COWBOY'S DREAMS OF HOME TURN TO CHILI-UP-THE-DESERT

almost effortlessly. But I still find playing in a key signature really hard. It's really strange—and I don't mind 'cause I don't play tonal music. I have always remembered this experience when, in my second year of undergrad, I got a new percussion teacher because the previous one retired, and he was evaluating everyone's skills. He had me sight-read a tonal melody, which I played horribly. Then he put an atonal melody in front of me, and I played it perfectly. And he said, "Huh, that's weird." Because prior to that, I think he just thought that I was not a good player, but I just don't process tonal music in the way that you're supposed to or something. I think this is completely tied to this idea of only hearing things as a singularity. Or, maybe a better way to put it is as a "total experience."

JH What's the quote? What is that quote ["total experience"] from?

SH I couldn't tell you.

JH Just a general, total experience.

SH Like a roller coaster.

JH It's all the ups and the downs and the screaming . . . they're all part of the same thing.

SH I mean, I feel that way.

LOOKING FOR A ROOM:
THE MUSIC OF STILL HOUSE PLANTS
Joe Bucciero

This essay is based on interviews conducted with the members of Still House Plants—Finlay Clark, Jessica Hickie-Kallenbach, and David Kennedy—via Zoom on June 2, 2020, and over email throughout July 2020.

A process fills its old bed & then it makes a new bed: to you past structure is backwards, you forget, you remember the past backwards & forget.

—Bernadette Mayer¹

About halfway through “Panels,” the third track on Still House Plants’ self-titled debut album (GLARC, 2016), Jessica Hickie-Kallenbach’s voice has a moment to itself. Her only accompaniment—Finlay Clark’s guitar—has dropped away as she delivers the previous line, slowly, in pieces: “At myself.” Now, with the memory of those last words set to fade, Hickie-Kallenbach returns. “In various,” she sings—“various.” As she lingers on the final syllable, Clark chimes in again with two strums, joined for the first time by David Kennedy’s cymbals. Then, another word: “Permutations.” It is a quality of Hickie-Kallenbach’s phrasing that you’re rarely sure when one sentence ends and the next begins; here, content matches form, with her extended articulations and pauses conveying a sense of fragmentation, or of wandering off—precisely the subjective split implied by her words. “At myself . . . in various . . . permutations.” Many of her lyrics stage a confrontation between *I* and *you* (or “U,” per her handwritten notes), altogether summoning those influential lines that begin *A Thousand Plateaus*: “Since each of us was several,” write Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari of their two-person collaboration, “there was already quite a crowd.”² Officially, there are three people in Still House Plants. But the music they make, even at its most spare, imports ideas, figures, and emotions from—as the next line of “Panels” implies—“various, various places.”

The three members found each other at Glasgow School of Art in the mid-2010s; none had matriculated with the intention of starting a band. Kennedy—the only one trained on the instrument they play in Still House Plants, and the only native Glaswegian—was focused on painting. Returning to drums, he followed the example of Can’s Jaki Liebezeit, forsaking his training for a style regimented only in its restraint (“I feel like it’s really bad for me,” he said with a laugh when I spoke to the group on Zoom).³ Clark, from London, had studied violin, but they were likewise drawn to visual art and to private sound experiments made on tape, with friends, among them fellow Londoner Hickie-Kallenbach. She had no concrete background in music beyond singing made-up songs “strictly, totally for me.” Some five years later, her approach remains quasi-diaristic. Clark points out that beyond the use of first-person lyrics, Hickie-Kallenbach brings a notebook on stage (or a smartphone, as in a 2019 Buenos Aires performance). As she recites the words—with

frustration, trepidation, or blitheness, depending on the line—she seems as if coaxing her emotions, aiming to clarify them. If Still House Plants sometimes recall No Wave, Clark and Kennedy hew closer to DNA’s nervy chaos (see: parts of “Panels” and later tracks like “Punchbag,” 2018) while Hickie-Kallenbach taps Lydia Lunch, who saw music as a channel for verbal exploration.⁴

Casual, private, and not-always-musical at first, the trio’s artistic collaboration developed within a scene that encouraged cross-disciplinary activities, both at the school—which boasts a wide-ranging curriculum and a recently shuttered student venue, the Vic, where friend and mentor Joel White had been booking shows—and in Glasgow at large. Their first performance occurred in May 2015 at the Open House Festival, a series of exhibitions and concerts held in flats across the city. Clark, Hickie-Kallenbach, and Kennedy played to “hundreds of people,” Kennedy recalls, in a living room adorned with his paintings as well as potted flora. They called the happening “Singing to Our House Plants”; not long after, they christened their group with the name they have now. (In the interim, they went by Your Hair Cut, which they now claim is a “much better band name.”)⁵ For Clark, growing up, “London was so big,” too big to find musical footing in; Glasgow, by contrast, proved “more accessible.” Where scenes in large cities tend to codify around specific trends, Still House Plants found themselves fitting in among aesthetic misfits: Golden Teacher’s off-kilter dance music, Ailie Ormston’s skeletal post-club, the non-music of Horse Whisperer, the out-rock of Bamyra. The latter two acts are associated with the label GLARC, co-run by White and Gordon Bruce, whose first release was Still House Plants’ debut. A local-focused label, GLARC upholds Glasgow’s experimentalist infrastructure alongside festivals such as Counterflows and places like the Green Door, the studio where Still House Plants recorded their first three releases. The group “learnt a lot there,” Clark said. To Hickie-Kallenbach, it is a microcosm of the wider milieu, insofar as it is “non-hierarchical” (a quality that defines Brian Eno’s “scenius” concept, to which Clark refers in a 2017 text for *Yes & No* magazine).⁶

Glasgow’s cultural infrastructure includes institutions outside of music as well: for example, the Modern Institute, an art gallery that shows prominent local and international artists, or the Centre for Contemporary Arts, where Still House Plants and the artist Thomas Leyland-Collins had a shared residency in 2017. Such opportunities have allowed the group space to stretch their practice. At CCA, “we recorded drone music from tiny synths that we’d built,” Kennedy recalled to the writer Claire Biddles, “then played it over

a huge sound system, using these amazing speakers meant for doing announcements in train stations.”⁷ Another residency followed in 2018, at London music space Café OTO, where the group played short sets interspersed with performances by bands like Bamyra and artists like the Berlin-based dancer Shade Théret.⁸ Still House Plants insist upon an open format—collaborations across media, across borders—which aligns them with those twenty-first-century tendencies to envision the “network” as art’s primary subject, or to shift nomenclatures from *exhibition* to *project*, *world* to *system*, *artist* to *collective*.⁹ To wit, on Zoom, the group discussed whether they ought to be called a collective rather than a band. The members could not agree, yet, ultimately, Hickie-Kallenbach wanted to reclaim “band.” “Collective” is more “malleable,” she admitted, “but I like when there are simple words [like ‘band’] that explain what we do.” Despite the range of their project, *what they do* has indeed come to resemble the activities of a band. What kind of band is Still House Plants?

* * *

The group often speaks about issues relevant to young artists: professionalization, self-promotion, and the like. They frame these issues less as rules to a careerist game than as a way to reckon with the material conditions for making work at all. If “every idea has its ideal medium in which it should be conveyed,” as Clark believes, this *ideal* relies upon possibility. The form Still House Plants takes has depended upon funds, that is, and, for as many grant applications as they have filled out, music has, perhaps counterintuitively, provided a more reliable funding structure than art. If records and concerts encounter a (slightly) sturdier market than long-term intermedia projects, Still House Plants have become a proper band in part by necessity.¹⁰ Their black-and-white album covers are “austere” in the sense of austerity, they suggest—“really economical,” Kennedy told me, a form of *jamming econo*. Not for nothing, there is a Minutemen quality to their recent song “Crreeease” (2020): jittery but tight.

Like the Minutemen, too, Still House Plants embed their music with a sense of place. But often, less than their home turfs—Glasgow or London, where the three have since relocated—they manifest experiences of elsewhere: the global network, physical and otherwise, to which they belong. The four songs on *Still House Plants* summon the group’s early travels, namely Clark and Hickie-Kallenbach’s study abroad in Chicago. “Warm in the

Car” introduces a tactic common to their discography: Clark and Kennedy play their instruments in unison, one hit per beat as if articulating their own sense of time. Not just because of the title, “Warm in the Car” brings to mind the slowcore (Low, Bedhead) that aptly soundtracks a drive through the Midwest, unlocking an anthemic power, even without a chorus. “The House Sound of Chicago” has some more variety. A repeated two-chord guitar figure encounters an ever-blooming drum groove and a saxophone, played by friend Calum O’Connor. Near the end, vocals join, vibrating in and around the mix. The members have elsewhere emphasized their interest in dance music, but rather than Chicago’s *house* sound, here, Still House Plants take on the city’s post-rock tradition (Tortoise, mostly).

Chicago resurfaces on *Assemblages*, the group’s second cassette, released on GLARC in June 2017. “N Lawndale Ave” references one of the city’s streets. Musically, it tracks some new developments: songs with reduced instrumentation (here, just vocals and guitar) and a pronounced grain in Hickie-Kallenbach’s voice (“mucus,” she said). But Lawndale is only a memory; Still House Plants note that their titles are typically unmoored from the songs’ content. *Assemblages*, indeed, feels more like an aesthetic return to the UK. “Dance,” another voice-and-guitar number, finds Clark effecting a chiming tone, something like the Durutti Column. “Other” invokes the rhythmic post-punk of Essential Logic, starting and stopping, highlighting Kennedy’s expressive drumming. The lyrics of “Sade” clarify that the group means not the Marquis but the British R&B group. While the guitar and drums unspool, Hickie-Kallenbach quotes the 1992 hit “Kiss of Life.” She parses the words carefully. In their familiarity, they help to articulate the muted or abstract desires that otherwise course through her own lyrics. Another track title mentions UK architect David Adjaye, too. Clark saw the titular bridge in New Orleans—a memory of another place that resurfaces when they see Adjaye structures at home.

Still House Plants traffic in this space between specificity and generality—between a particular person or landmark or sonic quotation and the quotidian, relatable feelings expressed in either the lyrics or the duly repetitive musical passages that subtend them. “Am all alone here but / It’s all good, and I’m busy,” Hickie-Kallenbach sings on “Abridged Lowes,” another slowcore-esque song with one of the group’s catchiest melodies. While they are hesitant to attach too much conceptual weight to this album’s title, it calls up Deleuze and Guattari’s assemblage theory, a framework for understanding objects as fluid, their parts able to be shifted and

substituted internally as well as among other objects.¹¹ Taking the clearest shape in music, according to the theorists, the theory suits Still House Plants. “An assemblage of enunciation does not speak of things,” Deleuze and Guattari write; “it speaks *on the same level as* states of things and states of content.”¹² Thanks, in part, to the fragility of their enunciation—wavering sounds often out of place, unmasked by effects or overdubs—the sonic and linguistic parts that comprise a Still House Plants song pass by, through, and into one another. Each track bears the weight, ideas, images of the others. Having anticipated and concretized some of Deleuze and Guattari’s analyses, Frantz Fanon saw desire as a force of both atomization and assertion. For, when desiring, “I ask to be considered . . . I am for somewhere else and for something else,” he writes.¹³ Deploying first-person, Hickie-Kallenbach asserts her presence in this flow of things, registering intensity (“Just the way you like it”) and ambivalence (“I try . . .”) from song to song, or even within the space of a few lines, with respect to those “things”—or the “you”—around her. The guitar and drums sound duly hesitant, a back-and-forth between identification and rejection.

The group worked with London’s bison label for their third release, *Long Play* (2018). In addition to the typical six- or seven-minute tracks, it includes several short songs, many of which feature just one instrument: a sort of musical test card. There is also a live recording, “Is It,” recorded at Cafe OTD with piano, voice, and drums; like the short experiments, it signals transparency and intimacy in a manner that befits Still House Plants’ origins (the singing or recording alone, the performing in apartments). “We write for rooms,” Hickie-Kallenbach has affirmed, like the domestic space Clark sketched for the album’s cover (fig. 1). Everyday life figures prominently in the lyrics. Opener “You OK,” with its light but persistent drum hits motoring throughout, inflates basic stressors to mythic proportions (it is Hickie-Kallenbach’s most vulnerable song, she said).¹⁴ She recalls being in Italy, trying to call “you” on her Ericsson cell phone: “The signal is flat and the battery is blank but I have a courtyard in front of me.” Later, lying in bed, mundane matters come alive, become epic. “Orchids and spiders in your palms,” she sings, “it’s getting alright / I’m angling for a Hadean-Peresphonic thing.” For Henri Lefebvre, everyday life trafficked in “illusion and truth, power and helplessness”; it concerned “the intersection of the sector man controls and the sector he does not control.”¹⁵ Stifled by a phone signal—what she cannot control—Hickie-Kallenbach amplifies the stakes of what she maybe *can*, her relationship, as it takes on intense, classical form. If Lefebvre

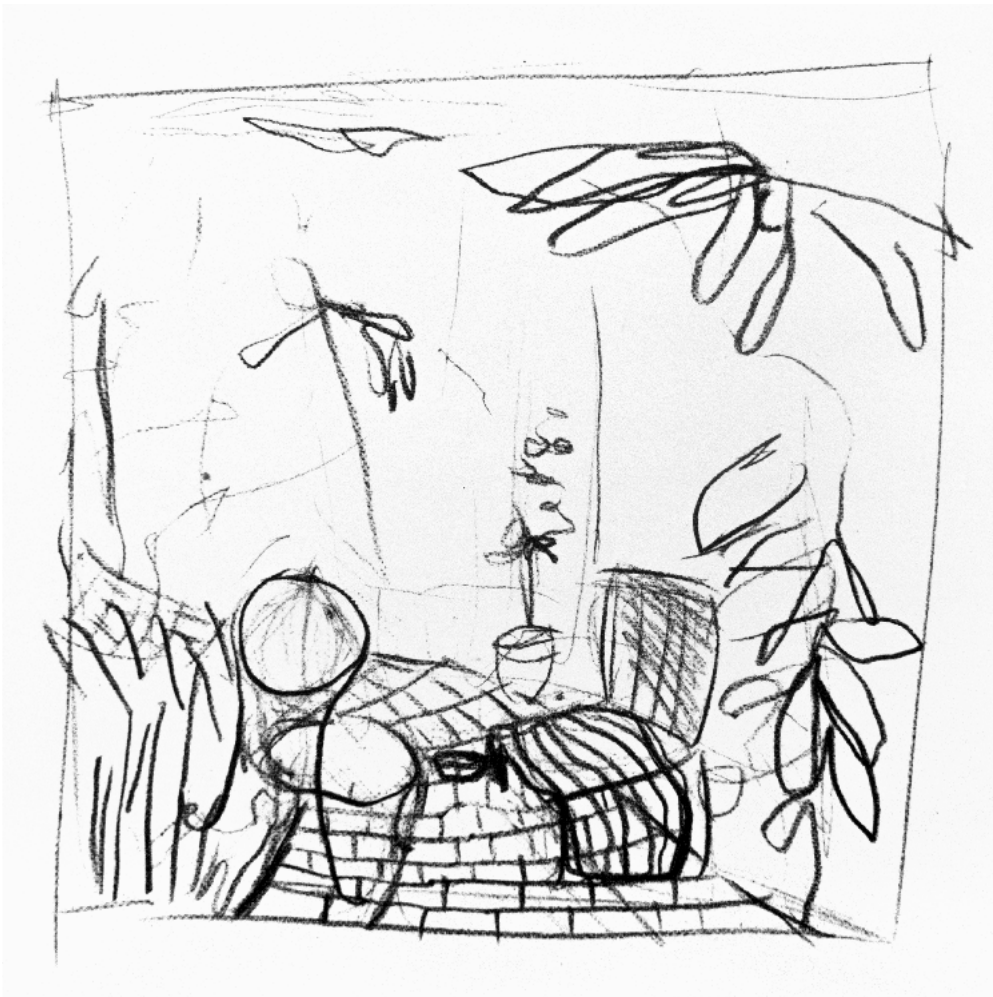


Fig. 1: Still House Plants, *Long Play* (bison, 2018).

tracked “sectors” by their rhythms (social, natural, bodily), it is fitting that *Long Play* foregrounds rhythmic exploration more than prior Still House Plants releases. Note the rumbling anti-beat of “Chicane,” the fractured piano cascades of “Shoulder Blade,” the jerky, This Heat–like march of “Left Brake.”

Pairing loose guitar-and-drum-based music with an interest in everyday situations and the interpersonal (and often gendered) power dynamics that motivate those situations is a strategy that harks back to UK post-punk of the late 1970s, groups like Ludus, the Raincoats, the Au Pairs. Hickie-Kallenbach’s voice makes sense in this tradition, too. Greil Marcus once called this an “anonymous” voice: generalized yet also personalized, “talking to itself,” caught up in uncertainty.¹⁶ Though Hickie-Kallenbach described her approach as like “dialogue” to Claire Biddles, many of her lyrics imply a “you” who seems absent, imagined, perhaps inside herself. “There are fields you grow in,” she muses on “Spit.” “You’re unavailable at most times.” Notwithstanding this, nor her tendency to “get a bit feral,” as she says, the “anonymous” and “talking to itself” designations belie the idiosyncrasy of her (and her predecessors’) delivery.¹⁷ Listening to her sing, building phrases up and then letting them collapse or float away, one ascertains instructions for dialogue, ways of addressing another person that remain centered on her own perspective. It is unsurprising that she and her groupmates received post-punk through the mediation of Life Without Buildings, the cult Scottish band whose members mostly attended Glasgow School of Art. Their vocalist, Sue Tompkins, repeated clipped phrases: shrewd observations, passing thoughts, nonsense. “Harmony in language,” Hickie-Kallenbach said of Tompkins’s approach, an image of text operating in multiple dimensions, synchronic and diachronic alike—not the “laudatory monologue” or “impersonal memory” that Guy Debord ascribes to the spectacle, but rather conversational and, in turn, personal.¹⁸ That Hickie-Kallenbach understands Life Without Buildings’ music to be constructed by language indicates that something similar may be true for Still House Plants (language rather than, for example, verses and choruses).¹⁹

Here, “language” ought to be taken broadly, for it helps to model how Clark and Kennedy operate as well. In the text for *Yes & No*, Clark identifies language as the crux of social and artistic relations. Echoing the group’s—and many post-punks’—disdain for hierarchy and impetus toward community, Clark writes on the necessity of a “co-existence of language . . . this universal language.” Such a dynamic can “establish a connection between Action and

Place.”²⁰ Still House Plants often “speak,” as it were, their “place” into existence. From song to song, repeating themselves, often with minimal variation, it is as if they are becoming acclimatized, acculturated, learning the proper cues of “N Lawndale Ave” or of Italy. Noam Chomsky distinguished between linguistic *performance* and *competence*: unconscious verbal repetition versus structural comprehension, the latter allowing for more creativity and authenticity of expression. Listening to Still House Plants or Life Without Buildings, one hears the two modes turned into a dialectic, the group playing one side off the other, rendering “competent” their own performance, such that it—already familiar—may be universally understood. Life Without Buildings achieves this in text. Consider “Daylighting” (2001), one of Clark’s favorite songs, in which Tompkins repeats “listen daylighting” again and again, slowly interspersing new phrases, one of them German (“Das Kino”). She sketches the boundaries of her *performance* and *competence* alike; repetition generates creation—new combinations and phrases. Still House Plants establish a similar dynamic, not just in words but also in sound. As they play, Clark and Kennedy home in on a phrase, letting the occasional note or cymbal splash—their version of a phoneme, say—fall out of place during an otherwise disciplined lesson.

* * *

Clark told me about a formative influence: *The Well-Tempered Clavier* (1722–42), Bach’s series of preludes and fugues in every key. “[Bach is] questioning what hasn’t been written,” they say; “structure is a means to support this questioning.” For all of Still House Plants’ discordance and arrhythmia, a song like “Panels”—where this article began—betrays the structural integrity that marks the group’s output, i.e., what allows for that smooth transition from one voice (Hickie-Kallenbach’s) to three. Their music is based on schematic scores, authored collectively, each bearing some visual similarity to the next yet permitting a different speed or order of operations (in a sense, like Bach). Sometimes, the group allots time for improv, but such time is squeezed between “a structured start and end,” as Kennedy says. Often, a song comprises “one small phrase that’s repeated and doesn’t stray,” he adds. One is tempted to analogize the parts of a Still House Plants song to Claude Lévi-Strauss’s “mythemes,” the structural, mappable components of a myth—like words in a language (indeed, myths *are* language, according to Lévi-Strauss). Across epochs and cultures, every version of the myth

augments or omits some components, but the myth’s thrust remains the same.²¹ In Still House Plants’ songs, variation does not change the meaning; instead, it only further articulates what Clark hoped to establish, a sort of universal language.²²

Kennedy laughed when recounting an audience member who was shocked that Still House Plants’ performances are not entirely improvised. “Oh,” the viewer said upon seeing them a second time. “You played the same thing twice.” The looser moments in the band’s oeuvre, like the beginning of their debut’s final track “Obi/Lowe’s,” never quite reject the self-imposed order. Here, the guitar and drums push against the gridlines and eventually relent. The song’s final six minutes take on the spare, quiet character that otherwise defines *Still House Plants*. If the group draws comparisons to artists like Derek Bailey or James “Blood” Ulmer, then it is a matter of sound or attitude more than method or structure (or, according to the members, direct influence). It is something like the relationship Chris Cutler described between his band Henry Cow and the Art Ensemble of Chicago: “The musical languages [are] compatible but not the same.”²³ Henry Cow improvised, but they were not “improvisational music” as such. Listening to the tight opener of their first album, *The Henry Cow Legend* (Virgin, 1973), it is clear that they were a rock band; Still House Plants are, too.²⁴ And if rock is myth is language, it is Still House Plants’ musical structure that, like *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, supports questioning of the content within.

Still House Plants’ botanical name is apt—that is, the group grows without severing its connections to a root.²⁵ Their approach bears similarity to twenty-first-century Australian rock—the slack deconstruction of groups like Mad Nanna—as well as to more recent material by the English band Guttersnipe, whose live show Still House Plants cite as an inspiration. These groups all communicate a deep but embattled engagement with rock itself, much like UK bands of the late 1970s. Post-punks framed the engagement in terms familiar to the UK Left, in particular to cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall, Dick Hebdige, and Angela McRobbie. Rock was an ideological form, a hegemonic tool. “Rock ’n’ roll is based on Black music,” the Raincoats noted. “And it is based *in* the exclusion of women and the ghettoization of Blacks. Which is why we want to put a bit of distance between what we do and the rock ’n’ roll tradition.” Their interviewer, Greil Marcus, extrapolated that “as the Raincoats stand back from the tradition they also open it up.”²⁶ Influenced by experimental and non-Western musics, these artists believed in critiquing rock from within—denaturalizing it,

forging “resistance through [its] rituals,” as Hall might have said.²⁷ No matter how free, how *un-rock*, their music became, it never quite betrayed its foundation: “When you’ve got a structure, you can break away from it,” said Gina Birch, a founding Raincoat, later on. “But when there is no structure, it’s really hard, because everyone’s kind of building their own structure, and sometimes it works and sometimes it falls apart.”²⁸

In addition to New Left discourse, art school provided—and continues to provide—an important backdrop to these ideological and artistic developments. Virginia Anderson, Benjamin Piekut, and Simon Reynolds, among others, have highlighted how such institutions, particularly in the postwar UK, brought lessons to bear on rock that “opened it up.”²⁹ Young artists were processing historical avant-garde imperatives—deskilling, mixing media—alongside incoming New Age and cybernetic strategies. *Process over product*. Art school and art school-adjacent acts occupied a continuum of rock and art music: Brian Eno, the Portsmouth Sinfonia, Gavin Bryars, Cornelius Cardew, Henry Cow. For Eno, rock and academic music suffered from formal and technical stagnation. Culling ideas from his teacher Roy Ascott, Eno posited ways of organizing musical processes to make room for chance and inter-media collaboration, and, in turn, produce something more open than a typical rock song yet still built upon a solid conceptual foundation.³⁰ Cardew and Henry Cow understood the issues Eno raised as the results of academic music’s bourgeois establishment and of commercial culture; these artists leveled critiques in material terms, not technical ones. They understood that their positions could only be realized in conflict with their systems of origin. Cardew articulated Marxism through the negative examples of John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen, in other words, while Henry Cow—a touring rock band on a major label—elaborated theirs through rock’s economic and cultural infrastructure.³¹

Rock thus retained currency for Henry Cow. “[We] understood the objective values and qualities inherent in the form of rock music,” writes Chris Cutler. “We were certain that this form had a deep content . . . we aimed to discover this core and liberate it.”³² In the late 1970s, post-punks participated in events hosted by Rock Against Racism, an organization founded in part to reclaim rock from people like Eric Clapton, who had voiced support for Conservative politician Enoch Powell. Around the same time, Henry Cow inaugurated Rock In Opposition (RIO), a festival—or “a cultural phenomenon,” in Cutler’s words—that was meant to provide a platform to bands from outside the UK that, more

to the point, sang in languages other than English.³³ Contesting the commercial music industry’s ways of doing business and its preferred language, RIO indicated a praxeological counterpart to the theory that Henry Cow’s members espoused. In addition to operating outside the space of their music, like many post-punks, the group kept faith that reshuffling internal dynamics—getting rid of the “composer” or “lead singer,” or recording and booking for oneself—could also reorient rock’s consciousness. Rather than mere spectacle—“the diplomatic representation of hierarchic society to itself,” as Debord writes—rock, in this fashion, might reinsert eccentric “expression.”³⁴

Received in the context of its social make-up and material processes, the music could, in turn, speak truth to power. “Whilst the expressive and ideological necessities of social groups have their strongest influence on the *content* of musics,” writes Cutler, “the innate necessities influence and delimit possible *forms*.”³⁵ He lambasts political lyrics like those of the Pop Group, instead advocating for new approaches to, above all, recording. Rather than notation, recording emphasizes the more egalitarian arenas of sound and performance; it “remembers” these items, Cutler argues, and allows them to be reproduced and “freed from time,” what Debord might term the “irreversible” or “*profoundly historical* time” of bourgeois production.³⁶ Cutler’s analysis reads as prescient today, but also optimistic: recordings have replaced notation precisely because of the ease with which they can be made, manipulated, circulated, and commodified (even if “immaterial”). Still, if his belief in the “life of music production” rendered audible in a self-made recording sounds like a commitment to the myth of “authenticity,” it doubles as a call to experience audio clips with the energy and curiosity one might apply to life itself. Pleasure is key, and Cutler insists, paraphrasing Socrates, that “what gives most pleasure is to learn.”³⁷ Rock sanctioned Henry Cow’s ever-“oppositional” stance and provided room to elaborate it within accessible—and educational, meaning pleasurable—communal and cultural forms.

* * *

“Pleasures” is also the first word (in a song of the same title) we hear on Still House Plants’ latest album, *Fast Edit*, released in August 2020 by bison and Blank Forms Editions (the publisher of this volume). Hickie-Kallenbach stretches her syllables all over the place as if possessed. “I can’t be helpful . . . memories get me all snarled . . . where else is there / Time to have fun.” Clark begins

tearing at their guitar strings; Kennedy raps his kit piece by piece, the audio severely compressed, stark given the band’s usual clarity. The next track, “Blink Twice,” proves its title well chosen. The instrumentation bears the character of a blinking fit, its phrases neither open nor closed. “Curb” and “Do” offer a similar feel—more spaced out and dissonant, they represent some of the group’s most deliberate, and difficult, music. In just twenty-eight seconds, “Choppy Nice” reaches this stuttering effect’s apex, with its lo-fi mix chopped-up post hoc: a *fast edit*. If Still House Plants traffic in themes of (dis)connectivity, pleasure, and memory, they address them on *Fast Edit* through a “delimit[ation of] possible forms,” as Chris Cutler would say, as much as through lyrics. Like “Choppy Nice,” “I’m in Your Orbit” is a sub-one-minute song recorded on a phone that sounds like eavesdropping on the first moments of band practice. The album “point[s] [more] toward how we work than how we sound,” Kennedy explained. (He is “not convinced our records have ever really captured how we sound anyway.”) Like the live recording on *Long Play* or the cache of phone recordings they shared on a Resonance FM show in 2019, these bits of *Fast Edit* imply processual transparency. Captured in Santiago de Chile, where the group performed and stayed, the informal recordings comprise a series of “rough edits,” in the band’s term: “guidances and tools.” Thus equipped, they produced new recordings in a London studio—their first time recording an album away from Glasgow’s Green Door—but kept some of the tracks in their original “rough” state.

Up against examples of the group’s trademark cleanliness and simplicity, the rougher touches on *Fast Edit* do more than simply index the “life of music production.” They reproduce and transmute it—a form of “sampling,” Hickie-Kallenbach suggests.³⁸ Clark notes how the distorted or compressed passages operationalize those familiar moments of clarity. Noise highlights signal and vice versa. Here, *each* relays information, with all the bits enunciated, as Deleuze and Guattari would suggest, on “the same level.”³⁹ Designed by the group, the album cover stages an encounter between signal and noise in visual terms. The record title and “Still House Plants” circumnavigate the sleeve; only some of the text is legible from any given view (fig. 2). Every letter is drawn out, on the verge of decay—something like Albert Oehlen’s pixelated line paintings, where the hand remains present yet seems disciplined by algorithms, given to programmed shapes and images (fig. 3). For all the fuzziness, a message comes through.

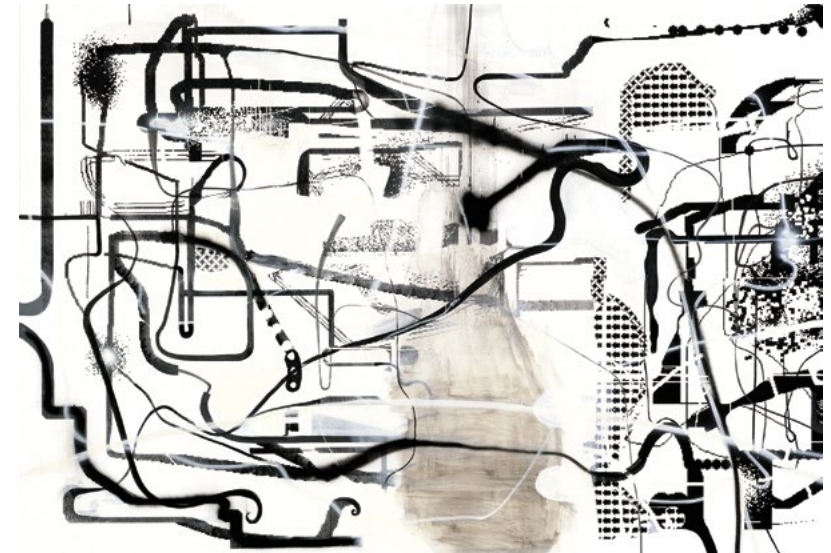


Fig. 2: Still House Plants, *Fast Edit* (Blank Forms Editions/bison, 2020).

Fig. 3: Albert Oehlen, *Untitled*, 2005/1992. Silkscreen, lacquer, and oil on canvas, 82 x 114 in. Courtesy Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin/Paris. Photo by Archive Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin/Paris. ©Albert Oehlen.

Still, horizontal scatters of information “get murky” over time, to quote a *Fast Edit* song title. The rhizome is “antimemory,” Deleuze and Guattari write; “Memories get me all snarled,” adds Hickie-Kallenbach.⁴⁰ Recordings unnerve her, she said, because “it’s gonna exist forever.” Her aversion to “forever” tracks with the lyrics, focused as they are on intimate, passing moments, the memories of which indeed have gotten her “snarled.” But, as Cutler writes, recordings also “free” the artist from time—and, one might add, from space as well. “If you want to be somewhere else, you can always write music and always listen to music,” Clark reminds us. A romantic sentiment, meant to overcome the sublime terror of eternity, their assurance nevertheless sheds light on how time operates on *Fast Edit*. The “rough edits” produce a rupture: the group’s diachronic development (their work or “language” over time) and its synchronic articulation (in the given song) meet. The friction between them is made audible in the skips and cuts and cracks; the dynamic between crafting and recording one’s art—usually submerged—floats to the surface but then dissolves. Nothing is quite in the past or the present or the future. (As Emily Dickinson wrote, “Forever—is composed of Nows.”)

Near the end of our conversation, Still House Plants stressed that their own project is very much in process. Sensible given their youth, the comments also reveal something about their outlook: despite a deadpan, sometimes sarcastic sense of humor, the group betray a thoroughgoing sincerity, a dynamic that Clark has self-reflexively described as “soft, playing tough.”⁴¹ Their softness manifests, in part, as flexibility—sensitivity to the contingencies of their modern life. Tapped into an international network, Still House Plants resist the seamless predictability such a network aims to provide (this includes staying clear of social media). They seem to find opportunity where the network breaks down, where its processes fail, where its “invisible” material presence ruptures a smooth surface. “The harder it is to get to a place, the better we play,” they said. “We’re so amped up, we play really well—we’re so relieved to get there.” Time is let loose, disconnected from the departures board. In the late 1960s, Debord and others, such as E.P. Thompson, wrote on the precapitalist and anticapitalist significance of such experiences.⁴² Working against time, a person no longer faces the discipline of industrial or global capital, its norms and flows, the synchronized clocks that keep it moving. Stuttering across continents, the audio clips on *Fast Edit* track the physical journeys that subtend immaterial transmissions; they document—poorly, by

default—how Still House Plants work and signal the presence of receivers on the other end(s).

While punk absorbed Debord’s revolutionary stance (notably via Malcolm McLaren), post-punks reflected on what seemed like the Left’s failure, not just in 1968 proper but throughout the 1970s, as the UK’s Labour Party fell apart alongside punk’s first wave. Even the most radical projects looked suspect. Writing on Henry Cow, Benjamin Piekut underscores the “uncertainty” of “rock collectivism” in action. Even Cutler admits that ventures such as Rock In Opposition “remained analytically and philosophically vague,” and, in turn, short-lived (if still influential).⁴³ The artists mentioned here found their ways of being, their ways of producing, at odds with the goals of both their intimate and expanded communities. New discourses and technologies had not kept their utopian promise, failing to manifest a more egalitarian society. But Cutler understood the defeat as only temporary. “The only way to resist, to survive, is to join forces with others who are also resisting,” he recalled. Henry Cow’s example might, at least, be taken up later on: “Another formal association—and this time a more politically conscious one—will grow up to drive this wedge in deeper.”⁴⁴ For today’s young UK city dwellers such as the Still House Plants, however, the situation may not have changed enough to allow Cutler’s dream to come to fruition. Now is a time, after all, when surging Left energy only ever abuts the maintenance of austerity and exclusionist measures which hark back to, and accelerate, those that faced the post-punk generation. We may simply see “different forms of the same alienation,” to borrow another phrase of Debord’s.⁴⁵ Yet, as well as Debord described the lived and mediated experience of Western life in the 1960s, Still House Plants, born in the mid-1990s, seem rather to express *different alienations*, perhaps a type available only to those who missed the glimpses of utopian energy that continued to appear, even if lightly, until the fall of the Berlin Wall.

When I first spoke to them in June 2020, the group could only collaborate by sending things back and forth. Hickie-Kallenbach moved to London in April 2018 after recording *Long Play*; Clark followed in January 2020, after *Fast Edit*, for a temporary stay that has become permanent during COVID-19. Kennedy finally joined in the fall, moving down from Glasgow. Their video for “Shy Song” (released July 2020) is no doubt *of its moment*, technologically and world-historically. It takes shape, like many of the group’s videos have, as a series of short, low-fidelity, peopleless fragments. Here, the clips are apartment walkthroughs sent to Clark and Hickie-Kallenbach

amid a socially distanced London apartment search. Striving to communicate the experience of living in a home, the walkthroughs present an alienating experience: the body that moves through the space remains hidden, as if a character in a do-it-yourself augmented-reality game. Some apartments appear lived in (towels hanging in a bathroom), while others seem abandoned (a stripped bed). The viewer's perspective and foundation exist only through a shifting system of mediation. "The externality of the spectacle in relation to the active man appears in the fact that his own gestures are no longer his but those of another who represents them to him," writes Debord. "This is why the spectator feels at home nowhere, because the spectacle is everywhere."⁴⁶ As Gang of Four put it: "At home, he's a tourist." Indeed, the viewer starts to feel unhomed as the video plays, the song's scattered sounds and mumbled vocalizations only heightening an experience of distance. "I'm looking for a room / And I'm frightened, too," Hickie-Kallenbach sings on another *Fast Edit* track, "Room." Like much of their music, "Room" and "Shy Song" register the uncertainty with which we drift through life, forever accompanied.

The group has used "art as a practical tool," Clark once said, "to get through difficulties and [find] grounding in oneself."⁴⁷ It is tricky, no doubt, when your ground has to uphold various permutations, a kind of ground familiar to those raised on the internet. In the space of their music, it seems that Still House Plants look for footing nevertheless; they implore us to look, too. As much as the video stokes alienation, what Bertolt Brecht would call an estrangement effect, theirs is, again, a *different alienation* than those experienced in the last century. Prompting neither dissolution nor concretization (one might say *reification*), the video for "Shy Song" demonstrates a twofold character to the alienation experienced today: its mobility, moving from room to room, IP address to IP address; and its intimacy. Ultimately, if it *unhomes* the viewer, the video also forwards an awkward invitation. No matter that this is a provisional or temporary home, an empty home, a home under lockdown, it is as if the artists try to reach out and bring us inside. For all their evocations of fragmentation and multiplicity, in other words, Still House Plants remain committed to forging connections. It is in this sense that, more than an art *collective*—a term connected to earlier formats of artistic production, one that implies a level of diffusion and, in turn, of uncertainty—Still House Plants are indeed a *band*, operating as both noun and verb (i.e., to *band* together). Thus bound, the uncertainty at least feels less daunting.

- 1 Bernadette Mayer, "July 31," in *Memory* (Catskill, NY: Siglio Press, 1971/2000), 333.
- 2 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 3.
- 3 Interview with the author, Zoom, June 2, 2020. All quotes from Still House Plants are taken from this interview unless otherwise noted.
- 4 See: Simon Reynolds, "Ono, Eno, Arto: Non-Musicians and the Emergence of 'Concept Rock,'" in *Totally Wired: Post-Punk Interviews and Overviews* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2010), 373.
- 5 Hickie-Kallenbach, quoted in Joshua Minsoo Kim, "024: Still House Plants," in *Tone Glow* no. 24 (July 27, 2020). The group's name likewise makes reference to the Still House Group, a defunct New York art "collective." Kennedy learned about them while in school and found their self-presentation objectionable: "rich art bros," he calls them. In Hickie-Kallenbach's view, they were "too serious and very privileged." Repurposing the name, Still House *Plants* signal an interest in realizing the open and collective production that so-called "collectives" like Still House Group only perform for art-world clout.
- 6 Finlay Clark, "Attention! Attention!," in *Yes & No* no. 1 (Spring 2017): 87. It's a "tool toward delocalizing hierarchy," Clark writes. "To go against the specialization of conventional Western discipline is to believe that not one single evolution will work everywhere." Clark and Hickie-Kallenbach are here quoted from a separate interview with the author, email, July 10, 2020.
- 7 Quoted in Claire Biddles, "Potted History," *The Wire* no. 419 (January 2019): 14.
- 8 See: Stephanie Phillips, "Still House Plants + Mette Rasmussen + Historically Fucked + Laurie Tompkins + Shade Théret + Cucina Povera + Bamya + Ashley Paul + Lewis Prosser Installation, Café Oto, London, UK," *The Wire* no. 423 (May 2019): 88.
- 9 In an unpublished text, "Music in Time," Clark refers to a notable text on art and networks, Michael Sanchez's "2011: Art and Transmission," published in the summer 2013 issue of *Artforum*. Clark cites Sanchez's argument that the circulation of art over smartphones, etc., "disempower[s] academics, critics, and curators in favor of consumers and sellers."
- 10 Kennedy admitted as much in our conversation: "When we started, it was a way of working together, to do things together. Not necessarily limited to playing music. More recently . . . [we] formed into a band."
- 11 Referring to a prior interview in which she discussed *Assemblages* at some length, with some reference to Guattari, Hickie-Kallenbach suggests to me that what she said was off the cuff and is not necessarily true to the group's intentions. See: Joeri Bruyninckx, "Still House Plants," in *It's Psychedelic Baby* (February 26, 2018).
- 12 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 87. Italics in original.
- 13 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 218.
- 14 Kim, "024: Still House Plants."
- 15 Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume 1: Introduction*, trans. John Moore (London: Verso, 1991), 21. The topic of control surfaces explicitly in the song "Curb": "I know you wouldn't want to curb me / But you could so easily / No one has that much control."
- 16 Greil Marcus, "It's Fab, It's Passionate, It's Wild, It's Intelligent! It's the Hot New Sound of England Today! (1980)," in *In the Fascist Bathroom: Punk in Pop Music, 1977–1982* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 129. Marcus refers, here, mainly to Gang of Four, whose Andy Gill would later speak to their music's personal politics in a way that resonates for Still House Plants, too: "It's too easy to say, 'The personal is the political,' therefore what we're talking about is politics. What we're talking about is how one feels about the various forces that are brought to bear on one's life. Things that some people would describe as personal are actually happening to everybody else and aren't personal. Like the way one feels pressurized to buy something. But I'm not sure how useful it is to describe them as political" (Gill, quoted

- in Reynolds, “Andy Gill,” in *Totally Wired*, 113–14).
- 17 Quoted in Biddles, “Potted History,” 14.
- 18 Interview with the author, email, July 10, 2020. See also: Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1983), 24, 131.
- 19 Clark interviewed Tompkins for a zine; see: Finlay Clark, “Sussing out the Vibes with Sue Tompkins,” in *GASM* (2015).
- 20 Clark, “Attention! Attention!,” 89.
- 21 See: Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth,” in *The Journal of American Folklore* 68, no. 270: 428–44.
- 22 Debord sees structuralism’s systems of organization and interpretation as consonant with late-capitalist operations. Structuralism’s “method of studying the code of messages is itself nothing but the product, and the acknowledgement, of a society where communication exists in the form of a cascade of hierarchic signals,” he writes (Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 202).
- 23 Cutler, quoted in Benjamin Piekut, *Henry Cow: The World Is a Problem* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 1.
- 24 The music writer Joshua Minsoo Kim, for one, has called them “rock” in multiple tweets, both with and without the scare quotes.
- 25 Clark highlighted the importance of the group’s simple set-up: “Voice, guitar (which is always in standard tuning, intentionally), and a drum kit, which is always pared down, are good means to continue to ask new questions and a means to think about what hasn’t been made yet.”
- 26 Marcus, “It’s Fab, It’s Passionate,” 113.
- 27 See: Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, eds., *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1975/1993).
- 28 Birch, quoted in Reynolds, *Totally Wired*, 197.
- 29 See, for example: Virginia Anderson, “British Experimental Music after Nyman,” in *Tomorrow Is the Question: New Directions in Experimental Music Studies*, ed. Benjamin Piekut (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).
- 30 See: Reynolds, “Ono, Eno, Arto.”
- 31 See: Piekut, *Henry Cow*, and, for Cardew, for instance, his *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism* (New York: Primary Information, 1971/2019).
- 32 Chris Cutler, “Technology, Politics and Contemporary Music: Necessity and Choice in Musical Forms,” *Popular Music* 4 (1984): 293.
- 33 Cutler, “Technology, Politics and Contemporary Music,” 296.
- 34 Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 23.
- 35 Cutler, “Technology, Politics and Contemporary Music,” 280.
- 36 Cutler, “Technology, Politics and Contemporary Music,” 287, and Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 141, 145.
- 37 Cutler, “Technology, Politics and Contemporary Music,” 293.
- 38 Interview with the author, email, July 10, 2020.
- 39 Still House Plants achieve what the Au Pairs—the post-punk group whose spare compositions and sexual analytics might offer the era’s best analogue to Still House Plants—called “Ideal Home Noise.” In this instance, the “noise” speaks of the “home” experience—the rooms for which the group writes, the temporary lodgings in which they record.
- 40 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 21.
- 41 Interview with the author, email, July 10, 2020. On a BBC radio show, Jennifer Lucy Allan likewise used “deadpan” to describe the group. In this, besides Buster Keaton, to whom Allan and then Finlay Clark have referred, Still House Plants belong to a cohort of UK musicians like Dean Blunt, Inga Copeland, and Joanne Robertson, whose humor is subtle, quasi-impenetrable, still cut with earnestness. (The grainy photo on the cover of *Still House Plants* obliquely refers to Blunt: Hickie-Kallenbach stands in front of a van labeled DEAN PLANT.)
- 42 See: E.P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” in *Past & Present*, no. 38 (December 1967): 56–97.
- 43 Piekut, *Henry Cow*, 27; Cutler, “Technology, Politics and Contemporary Music,” 296.
- 44 Cutler, “Technology, Politics and Contemporary Music,” 296.
- 45 Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 63.
- 46 Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 30.
- 47 Clark, quoted in Biddles, “Potted History,” 14.