

LITERARY AND INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT

The literary community around Kent State University in the early 1970s encouraged participation, self-publishing, and the blending of media. It was there that Mothersbaugh produced the first major work of his early career, *My Struggle, Booji Boy*, a 280-page book of his own writings and illustrations. Rejecting American postwar optimism, Mothersbaugh's aesthetic was cynical, confrontational, and crude—an attitude that only later became associated with the term “punk.”

DADA PUNK

From 1974 to when they signed with Warner Bros. in 1978, DEVO's popularity as a band continued to grow, even as they rejected the cool stylishness that defined rock music at the time. Instead, they performed in matching construction overalls, hazmat suits, garbage bags, and other oddball costumes. In this way DEVO was more aligned with the aesthetics of art movements like Dada and Surrealism than with the celebrity-driven styles of popular music.

COUNTERCULTURE ORIGINS

Before they even considered themselves a band, Mothersbaugh and fellow students Gerald Casale and Bob Lewis were invited in 1973 to perform at Kent State University's annual Creative Arts Festival alongside Beat poets and other leaders in the countercultural arts. Though DEVO later became associated with popular music, the context of their first performances reveals their intellectual and artistic foundations outside the mainstream.

KENT STATE UNIVERSITY

Mothersbaugh enrolled as an art student at Kent State University in 1968 at a time when the campus was roiled with student protests over the Vietnam War. On May 4, 1970, during a protest on the campus, the National Guard shot and killed four Kent State students and wounded nine others. This incident became a defining tragedy of the generation.

The shooting provoked Mothersbaugh and his classmates Casale and Lewis to develop a philosophy of "de-evolution," which held that the world was not evolving but devolving. Mothersbaugh transformed the theory into a creative impulsive, and virtually all of his lifelong body of work comes from this early understanding of the world as afflicted or broken.

BOOJI BOY AND THE CHILD PERSPECTIVE

Mothersbaugh's man-child character Booji (pronounced *Boogie*) Boy personifies the element of chaos that disrupts DEVO's robotic and repetitive demeanor. More than a mascot for DEVO, Booji Boy is Mothersbaugh's lifelong alter ego. Ever since he found the rosy-cheeked, blond-haired, full-head mask in a thrift store in the early 1970s, Booji Boy has been the necessary counterbalance to the hard-edge posturing of the group and the character's bizarre appearance points to Mothersbaugh's fascination with the child's view of the world. The plump, blathering figure appears in virtually every live performance, moving inanely and delivering high-pitched stream-of-consciousness monologues. Booji Boy represents a naïf, suggesting Mothersbaugh's desire to find freedom from the norms and regulations of society. The man-child is also a kind of mutant, representing Mothersbaugh's interest in the perverse and weird elements of society.

UNIFORMITY AND DEFIANCE

Though Mothersbaugh collaborated with Gerald Casale and others in creating the visual identity of DEVO, the essential tension in Mothersbaugh's art—the contrast between uniformity and deviance—became the underlying dichotomy in DEVO. Mothersbaugh's fascination with medical imagery and the postwar fiction of the American dream also became integral to the aesthetics of the band.

“Who's making pop art [is] not going to be some guy sitting over there with a band in a bar, and it's not going to be somebody that's sitting on a hill painting landscapes; it's going to be somebody that works in the pop media of our time. They're going to be doing stuff that goes on television and it's going to be music and pictures together. And that's what we wanted to be. We wanted to be in the new art form.”

—DEVO

POPULAR ART FORMS

In the early 1970s, Mothersbaugh's interest in reaching broad audiences expressed itself in democratic art forms such as decals and mail art. Later, he and his bandmates saw that the commercial music industry allowed them to bring their art to wide audiences, not just through music but through their creative involvement in communications, merchandise, and, ultimately, music videos. Though their excessive embrace of commercialism was ironic, it was also a continuation of their countercultural roots.

SPECTACLE

DEVO's live performances involve elaborate choreography and frequent costume changes. Similarly, much of Mothersbaugh's visual art demonstrates the same theatricality. Consistent with his interest in reaching broad audiences, Mothersbaugh's art embraces spectacle and excess.

MIRROR IMAGES AND MUTANTS

Mothersbaugh first began to use mirror images in his journals of the early 1990s, and he continues to use symmetrical forms even in his most recent work. In the 1990s, he began his most prominent mirror-image work, the *Beautiful Mutants* series of photographs, in which he transformed historical and traditional figures into mutants. His interest in mirrors is concurrent with his longtime interest in eyes, which was triggered early on by his severe myopia.

RELATIONSHIP TO TECHNOLOGY

Mothersbaugh has always had an unconventional fascination with machines, using them not as a means of efficiency but as a material to be manipulated in creating something new and personal. Working against the tendency of technology to generate predictable results, he alters mass-produced machines and assembles unexpected parts to form new, idiosyncratic hybrids. These mutant machines exemplify his belief that originality arises from imperfection. He continually embraces flaws, like his own myopia, as a countermeasure to the tendency toward uniformity in society.

RUGS

Mothersbaugh's rug series began in 1994 after the artist designed an entry mat for his studio based on one of his postcard-size drawings. Rugs, with their versatility and functionality, demonstrate the artist's interest in nontraditional art forms—especially those associated with consumer culture. Always exploring new means of production, Mothersbaugh transferred his rug images into video animations, which add an element of drama, spectacle, and technology.

ORCHESTRIONS

Mothersbaugh's music-making machines, or orchestrions, feature discarded organ pipes and birdcalls that he has been collecting for years. He first assembles the materials, then adapts his compositions to the quirks of each machine. The orchestrions embody Mothersbaugh's belief that flaws are the key to originality.

According to the artist, "The limiting factor gives it something unique. It helps you not fall into the cliché of twelve keys in a row. You've got five black ones and seven white ones that repeat all the way up the keyboard. But if you change something in that pattern, if you break one of those keys off the keyboard so when you go for an F-sharp it's not there, it can force you to rethink how to say what you're trying to say."

MUSIC COMPOSITION

Mothersbaugh has scored hundreds of films, television shows, commercials, and video games, beginning in 1986 with the popular television series *Pee-wee's Playhouse*. Just as his visual art celebrates the contrast between hand- and machine-made, his musical compositions often alternate between traditional and electronic instruments and juxtapose such disparate elements as hip-hop beats and classical melodies. His scores suggest his sense of play; he adds an eccentric flair to the emotional grandeur of symphonic music.

PRINTS

Printmaking appealed to Mothersbaugh since his days making decals and mail art, in part because it allowed him to distribute his work broadly. Printmaking also permitted Mothersbaugh to make large-scale work, which was difficult for him as his corrected vision favored working close at hand. His source materials for his prints are drawn images and collages on postcard-size paper.

ROLI POLIS

The installation *Spin Chain the Gears* features hand-painted ceramic figures on synthetic grass, some of which are positioned around square-dance diagrams as if they were preparing to dance. Like mutations of commercially produced toys, the figures, or Roli Polis as Mothersbaugh calls them, are representative of his cartoonish version of pop art. Maintaining the alter ego of a man-child for his entire career, Mothersbaugh has consistently seen games and play as forms of escape from and criticism of the self-serious and violently absurd world adults have created for themselves.

POSTCARD DIARIES

For over 30 years, Mothersbaugh has been producing between one and 25 postcard-size artworks daily, ultimately amassing a collection of over 30,000. He began working in the 4 x 6-inch scale in the 1970s, creating small-scale photo-collage lithograph prints.

Mothersbaugh lost regular access to a printmaking studio when DEVO began a heavy touring schedule. On the road, he drew on postcard-size paper. As he became less focused on the band, his postcard output increased dramatically. Sometimes drawing with a brush on antique postcards salvaged from thrift stores, Mothersbaugh viewed the postcards as part notebook, part sketchbook, part personal diary. These images have become the source material for many other artworks, including prints, rugs, sculptures, and paintings.