

All My Brain and Body Need

That's Ian Dury, celebrating the old pleasure-seeking equation, Sex and Drugs and Rock and Roll, in one of his big hits from 1977. Interestingly, though, the song does not really *rock*; certainly it is funky, but in a somewhat subdued, MOR manner. And the sexual element is likewise toned down, much more tender, even loving, than hard-core. And, as for the drugs, they are utterly absent to what is after all just a pop song, and a remarkably well crafted – I want to say, professional – one at that. Neither psychedelic nor frenetic nor spacey, it is driven by a precision-drilled rhythm section that maintains a regular pace throughout, just shy of the speed limit. In other words, the song does not quite deliver on the delirious promise of its title, but then again, how could it? Even those songs that come closer to doing so are bound to fall short of the mark, so why bother? Instead of placing us, the audience, “in it,” we get pushed off to the margins: sex and drugs and rock and roll are on their way, or else have already passed us by. Whether in a state of eager anticipation or come-down, the song will always be about something other than the thing itself, and if this is true for music, then it is all the more so for art.

Artworks are inherently diffident, untouchable, cool; their proper environment, the atmosphere in which they exist, is one of distanced yet focused contemplation, the very antithesis of the nightclub or bedroom. “All art aspires to the condition of music,” Walter Pater has famously claimed, but what is this “condition,” exactly? Is it that of immediacy, the direct infusion of emotionality, or is it instead a “condition” more literally, “that which exists as an occasion of something else,” in the words of the dictionary? It could be said of the artworks assembled here that they are all conditioned upon “something else,” something they are not in themselves and can only approach in a roundabout way. For instance, Jan Van Imschoot's painting of John Lydon onstage must remain resolutely mute, even as a share of his angry energy is carried over in agitated brushwork. Likewise, Brian Kennon's reproductions from the pages of seventies-era “men's magazines” can only produce at the most an attenuated sort of titillation. Perhaps the closest we come to experiencing the intensity of feeling that are “all my brain and body need,” according to Dury, is in Johan Grimont's video which resumes that great Surrealist theme of *l'amour fou* in both substance and form. But, here as well, a host of distancing devices intrude: most notably, the two girls who serve as a kind of Greek chorus for the action onscreen, and wind up speaking of things they are obviously too young to understand.

Maha Saab's sculpture of hand-painted canvas embraced by wire mesh, Rachel Foullon's sculpture of pierced canvas on polished nickel and Patricia Fernandez' muted dyed canvas wearily announcing 1980 each uniquely provoke an eloquent rawness and fearlessness reflective of their approach to their practices. Anton Lieberman's hot glue drawings are spontaneous hurried gestures so emotionally charged that their presence lingers. There is of course an intimate interplay of “brain and body” in the making of every artwork, and some part of this is inevitably resumed in reception. Moreover, one could say that if the production of art is itself intoxicating, at least on occasion, then this will get passed on as well to the viewer – a contact high. Perhaps, then, the “condition” that art shares with sex and drugs and rock and roll is that of an addiction, and it would seem that this word comes closer to describing just what these particular works are about. The desire of the addict grows in inverse proportion to an object that diminishes in time. Sex and drugs and rock and roll are here proposed as analogies for what it is like to be an art-lover who knows that their desire is one-sided and cannot be returned, but for precisely this reason goes on desiring.

---Jan Tumlir