

## Martin Kann and the Art of Music

You may initially have thought that this album-cover contains a concept album by Bob Hund produced for their retrospective exhibition at Rönnecks Antikvariat. But what you are holding in your hand is a concept album-cover by Martin Kann. The fact is, there is no vinyl record on either side of this gate-folded cover, instead, the cover acts as a retrospective survey (or 'record') of the visual material that Martin has used to frame Bob Hund's music over the past two decades.

When Martin Kann phoned me up to ask if I would like to be involved in a survey exhibition of his work with Bob Hund I was naturally flattered but a bit surprised. As Martin knows, I am hardly a historian or theorist of Swedish rock music, nor am I particularly steeped in the world of advertising and design which is his forte. But as Martin put it, I was perfect precisely because of this lack of knowledge. What would happen if a curator of contemporary art from Canada was given the license to historicize a Swedish rock band from outside its usual music and design discourse? Perhaps my askance view could provide a new framework within which to understand Bob Hund's sound and image.

Whatever Martin's reason were for asking me, a key attraction for me was the fact that the exhibition would take place at Rönnecks Antikvariat – one of the oldest antiquarian bookstores in Stockholm where I had spent much time and money in the early nineties doing research on the reception of Marcel Duchamp's work in Scandinavia. By the mid-nineties Bob Hund had certainly entered my mind in some way. But for someone not living in Sweden, only visiting Stockholm on short scholarly research trips, the band was not so much something I was listening to, as much as a band I should have been listening to. At least this is what I was told by my younger cousin Marc who insisted that their music was as relevant to me as say a PJ Harvey or the Pixies. Thanks to Marc, I always ended up leaving Sweden with a few homespun tape recordings of Bob Hund sandwiched between issues of *Konstrevy* and *Bonniers Litterära Magasin*. But due to my introduction to their music via these tapes, I missed an essential aspect of their attitude which manifests itself over the years in Martin Kann's cover designs.

It was not until around 1998 that I first connected the aesthetics of Martin Kann with Bob Hund. Martin arrived in my home town of Vancouver introducing himself as a friend of the artist Henrik Håkansson whom I had met the previous year at the Nordic Pavillion of the Venice Biennale. What I discovered was a symbiotic relationship between the band and its art director – reminding me of the collaborative relationship of say Andy Warhol and The Velvet Underground or Mike Mills and the Beastie Boys. While this contrived game

of reference may not be entirely appropriate, it may be the kind of creative misreading Martin was looking for when he asked me to write these liner notes.

As I found out by doing a quick Google search, one of the most common comparisons made with Bob Hund is with the expressionist rock band Pere Ubu, a band that I have always taken notice of based on their name's reference to the protagonist in Alfred Jarry's absurdist story *Ubu Roi* (1896). My interest in Jarry stems from his influence on Marcel Duchamp who shared his obsession with 'the truth of contradictions and exceptions.' Duchamp's pataphysical games of sounds and images in turn inspired a whole generation of post-war avant-garde artists that I was studying in the basement of



Per Olof Ultvedt, *Grisho*, 1958

Rönnecks back in the 1990s. Back then I was not so interested in Pere Ubu as I was in a Swedish artist named Per Olof Ultvedt (1927-2006). Like Ubu, Ultvedt was an artist who also engaged in pataphysical logic with an acidic sense of humor that manifested itself in visual and sonic vexations.

In 1958, Ultvedt shocked the Stockholm art establishment by exhibiting *Grisho* (Pig Trough) — an inverted fragment of an altar-cabinet turned into an abject object from a farm. On a formal level this readymade object referenced and rejected the distinctly urban sensibility of Geometric Abstraction and the Swedish Bauhaus. On a conceptual level it simultaneously harked back to Duchamp's *Fountain* of 1917. What I now

come to realize is that it is this same flair for aesthetic disorientation that should have made me interested in Bob Hund. In both cases, hillbilly and city-slick sensibilities dissolve into a territory of total formal anarchy that makes noise. This was perhaps most evident in Ultvedt's contribution to the 1962 Venice Biennale when he installed a Calder inspired mobile outside the Nordic Pavillion that he constructed out of planks, rope and beer bottles – evoking the sound of a badly constructed wind-chime by a drunk drift-wood artist. One could say that whereas Ultvedt cobbled together his own trope-like forms out of the legacy of Surrealism and Dada to produce what the art critic Sandro-Key Åberg once saw as “revolt, mockery and grimace against the accepted, against social and artistic conventions and judgements,” Bob Hund has managed to produce its own form of “folk music for folk who do not behave like folk” out of the highly commercialized remnants of an avant-garde history of rock-and-roll.

Insisting for years to only sing in Swedish with their strong Scanian accent, Bob Hund has remained loyal to a Scandinavian fan base at the expense of international exposure. This reluctance to go 'big' reminds me of Ultvedt who in 1962 stood at the brink of international art world success. When I asked him in 1992 why he suddenly dropped out of this international arena he told me a short story about how he had been approached by Ileana Sonnabend, one of the most influential art dealers in 1960s New York (known as the 'mom of Pop Art') to see if he could contribute something to an important group exhibition in London that included friends of his such as Robert Rauschenberg. According to Ultvedt, Sonnabend maintained that he could do anything he wanted as long as it fit within a shipping crate. As Ultvedt put it, “no matter how hard I tried to make my assemblage fit within the parameters of the box, some fucking stick kept poking out.” When asked whether this box was a metaphor for the shallow and contained nature of the commercial art world, Ultvedt simply replied: “The thing is, they wanted me to travel around like some ridiculous pop star. I don't even play guitar!”

Martin Kann does not play guitar or travel around with Bob Hund, instead he stays at home in the countryside of Skåne where he makes little boxes and album covers that are custom designed to allow Bob Hund's idiosyncratic sound and deep lyrics to spill over into the shallow terrain of the music industry in a profound way. Coquetting the visual standards of the music industry, Kann's work has over the years signaled that there is still some room left for sonic and visual independence for musicians who behave like artists.

Patrik Andersson, *Vancouver*, 2009