

Ecstatic Trance: Artists on Rock My Religion

EN

Sarah Benslimane, Samantha Box,
Dan Graham, Ashton Phillips, Diogo Pinto

14.11.2025–03.01.2026

Preface

It all began with an unlikely friendship. It was 1996 and I was a newly minted MA graduate working in the education department at Camden Arts Centre in London. Dan Graham was exhibiting pavilions there, with a co-presentation at the Architectural Association. When Dan arrived at CAC, in a terrible mood, he dramatically dropped a large pile of books on a desk and announced how bored he was. The Director, the nurturing Virgo Jenni Lomax, assigned him to me as the token American and perhaps as the only person brave enough to take him out for lunch. I took Dan for a typical fry-up at a workers' café just off the Finchley Road. He loved seeing the workers socialize and drink strong builders' tea with their meals. Our dialogue went something like this:

DG: "I bet you were a cheerleader."

KB: "I hated cheerleaders. I drove around in cars drinking with boys."

We were fast friends. Dan said my Taurus Dog matched his Aries Horse—dogs love horses and vice versa. My working-class roots made him comfortable, and my lack of sycophantic responses was likely refreshing to an artist at the pinnacle of his career. He had the permanent rooftop installation at DIA in Chelsea and representation in leading commercial galleries: Lisson Gallery in London, Marian Goodman in New York, Massimo Manini in Milan, etc.

When Dan returned to NY we began a correspondence that would span decade and included postcards, newspaper clippings, and CDs, and various ephemera. I sent him a VHS tape of a workshop that I organized where toddlers interacted with his pavilion, in which they played with their twisted perception, and he called to say it was "the best video of my work ever made." Dan loved when real civilians--non-art specialists--engaged with his work. For him that was a pinnacle of achievement and their praise meant more than art world accolades. For over 25 years our friendship sustained, through divorces and new boyfriends (mine), pet deaths (his cat, my dog), grave illness and mental breakdowns. I was on Dan's daily call list, which meant a phone call every morning, whose topics ranged from the Queens corgis and the compatibility of astrological signs for work or romance, to existential angst, the art world and of course, music. Dan's abiding passion for music spanned his career. For example, his collaboration with Japanther, Tony Oursler, Rodney Graham and Phillip Huber on the theatrical rock opera puppet show *Don't Trust Anyone Over Thirty* 2004. In this work a 24-year-old rock singer is elected President of the US who sends anyone over 30 to LSD rehabilitation camps.

Rock My Religion, Graham's full length video essay, is perhaps the most recognized work on this subject in his oeuvre, created in several versions, the last of which dates from 1982–84. (A book of the same title was published with Graham's writing on the subject.) In his video, Graham examines ritualistic Shaker dances alongside punk rock, Patti Smith, and iconic American music, layering various elements within the work. For example, near the beginning of the video, we hear the artist's voice over as well as Kim Gordon singing "Shake off your flesh!" on a Sonic Youth track, while illustrations of Ann Lee and images from the mosh pit of a Black Flag gig flash before our eyes between rolling excerpts of text. In the spirit of rebellion, Graham presents his argument with the enthusiasm of a teenage fan. Kodwo Eshun (British-Ghanaian writer, theorist and filmmaker) writes:

It never thinks of questioning Ann Lee; its faith in her faith works to persuade viewers of the contemporary significance of the Shakers, a group of celibate American communists who invented a way of living that would allow them to protect themselves from the social murder committed by capitalism. (Kodwo Eshun, *Rock My Religion*, London: Afterall, 2012, p 32.)

Eshun also acknowledged the work's shortcomings regarding its exclusion of the significant African American contribution to the history of rock and roll. Indeed, Graham's subjectivity as a white, American male author might most generously be understood as an eccentric and autodidactic cultural history.

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Exhibition

Ecstatic Trance: Artists on Rock My Religion is an exhibition that is conceived in homage to the legacy of Graham and his video essay. It includes four living artists that create work in the spirit of his practice as well as his collection of CD compilations. Sarah Benslimane, Samantha Box, Ashton Phillips, and Diogo Pinto hail from different corners of the world, but each engage with themes including the multivalent levels of digital culture; spiritual and sexual ecstasy, and music. The show acknowledges the quirky brilliance of *Rock My Religion* and seeks to understand its legacy through a wider lens. The four living artists contribute works from subjectivities that diverge vastly from Graham's. Yet their works echo themes and obsessions of Graham's, including spirituality, sexuality, popular culture, and of course music and performance. This exhibition aims to see *Rock My Religion* through contemporary themes and issues in order to determine its place in contemporary culture.

The viewer enters marytwo to find Diogo Pinto's (b 1993, Portugal) *Spellbound 2025*, a painting in oil on canvas that was created for this exhibition. Typical of Pinto's practice, which is research based and often takes a curatorial approach, the painting plays with visual perception and archival taxonomies. *Spellbound* depicts a 17th century Baroque instrument called a 'serpent flute' that twists in uncanny chicanes like a slithering snake. The flute, which was carved from wood and covered in leather with a brass mouthpiece, is painted with its shadow against a bright yellow background. This mimics the original reproduction of the work that the artist found in a book on antique musical instruments in his library. The graphic style of the book—the instruments were photographed with dramatic shadows against colorful backgrounds—reminded Pinto of the Plato's Cave myth, where a group of people live only seeing shadows of passing people and objects with no idea of the reality of the outside world. This tension between the world of reality and the world of appearances is central to Pinto's practice.

The flute's seductive curves are also a metaphor for original sin, which relates to Graham's fascination with Shaker religious practices, including celibacy. It also evokes thoughts of snake charmers whose ability to hypnotize the serpent as well as onlookers can feel like a transcendental act. Pinto often creates a family of work with a conceptual lineage, even including existing artworks by other artists, for his solo shows. For *Ecstatic Trance* he wanted to create a single painting that condensed several facets of the project: music, sexuality, and cultural heritage align in what first appears to be a simple representation of an object.

Also in the front space, visitors are invited to sit at a table to peruse and play *Dan Graham's Greatest Hits, Volumes 1 - 21 + The Kinks 2004–2022/2025*. These compilations were Graham's love language: he compiled, reproduced, and distributed them to friends and colleagues, either in person or sent by post. The eclecticism of the tracks—from Graham's beloved The Kinks and Lucinda Williams to Bob Dylan and Kenny Chesny—reveal the artist's deep engagement with several genres' music as well as his sense of humor. For example, on Volume 1, Joan Osborne's song 'What if God Were One of Us' includes the lyrics:

*What if god were one of us,
just a slob like one of us,
just a stranger on a bus trying to make his way home*

I can just imagine Dan, the artist who said, "all conceptual art must be humorous", chuckling devilishly at these lyrics. Other tracks by the Ronettes, Judy Garland, Billie Holiday, and Dean Martin are evidence of his obsession with popular American music, a topic found in several of his seminal texts in the book version of *Rock My Religion*.

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A warm glow pulls the viewer into the back space, where Ashton Phillips (b 1981, US) has created a site-specific installation. *Authority Complex (Mold me. Hold me. Take me. Break me. Use me for your pleasure. Be not afraid.)* 2025 includes wire, clay, light, text, and sound to create a psychedelic, mystical experience where the visitor becomes enmeshed in the work's many layers of references. This multi-media piece was germinated from the "phallic mystery cult" part of *Rock My Religion* and creates a speculative text and tower for those that might embody a contemporary phallic cult.

The shape of *Authority Complex* is inspired by a central pillar form in the Metanghashvara Shiva temple in Khajuraho, a UNESCO heritage site in Madhya Pradesh, India. Pilgrims who worship in this Hindu site pour milk and throw flowers on the central phallic form as they circumnavigate it. Their performative, ecstatic worship practice is echoed in how a visitor views Phillips' work: one must walk around it and get close to it to view it properly, becoming enmeshed in the light projection and casting their own shadow on the texts that are printed upon the work's clay surface. *Authority Complex* also echoes the myth of Cybele, the Phrygian goddess known as the great mother. Followers of Cybele would castrate themselves and engage in ecstatic worship; indeed, Cybele may be understood as one of the predecessors of celebratory trans culture today. The cracks in the surface of Phillips' pillar find echoes in the 'cracking' of trans culture, and the overlapping clay references the folded skin patches of phalloplasty.

Phillips created a four-track soundtrack for the work, which plays from mini speakers embedded within its surface. The tracks include the artist reading the text imprinted on the central phallic form as well as a field recording of crocodiles, frogs, and other animals that are referenced in the text. These creatures can change genders in the wild and are also metaphors for trans culture as well as the impacts of ecological devastation and species adaptation. As the amphibian and reptilian species adapt to the Anthropocene, trans humans are struggling with political and social subjugation in his native US. Phillips has also included tracks recorded in a cathedral-like recycling center and commercial audio sources that are surgical consultations for penile enlargement and testosterone replacement therapy as well as consultations for phalloplasty and metoidioplasty. The artist was amazed at how cis men have such easy access to surgical enhancement while trans people jump through several hoops before they can obtain the medical procedures. His mystical pillar, its complex combination of text and sound, are in alignment with Graham's investigation into religious and performative ecstasy.

Caribbean Colada 2024 is a 3D lenticular print by Samantha Box (b 1977, Jamaica), a New York based artist whose lens-based practice investigates the complex and evolving notions of identity, both personal and national. The multitude of visual layers in the 3D print echoes Graham's layering of image, text, and sound in *Rock My Religion*. It is also a nod to his love of kitschy forms, such as lenticular postcards that he exchanged with several of his friends.

In *Caribbean Colada*, layers of images appear to float across the surface. The Queen of England, taken from an iconic postal stamp, is seen in negative. She anchors the center of the work, a reference to over three hundred years of colonial rule by the British Empire, which followed a Spanish colonization. The Queen is flanked by palm trees that mirror each other, each seen with a man of climbing them; flanking each palm tree is a standard Little Tree brand air freshener, which is made in America and ubiquitous to gas stations and car washes alike. Box chooses a bright blue tree that features an open coconut and reads 'Caribbean Colada' at its base. These cheap, chemical reproductions of a supposedly tropical scent are another nod to the global tendency towards extraction that pillages and distills entire nations into ephemeral, cheap objects.

Tourist banners featuring figures that don traditional dress and carry baskets on their heads or ride horses read Jamaica in reverse and flank the bottom quadrant of the print. In addition, a red, cursive 'Jamaica' is layered over the center of the composition and is repeated in the upper right-hand corner, a marketing tag that becomes an avatar for an entire nation of people.

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Seemingly underneath is the slogan '(you've earned it)', a marketing campaign that targeted vacationers to the island as part of a luxury lifestyle. Box compiles these features in a 3D lenticular format, which shapeshifts as the viewer experiences it. This oscillation echoes the island's various identities: as a sun-soaked Caribbean location, as a British subject, and as a destination marketed to white tourists.

On the back wall of marytwo, Sarah Benslimane's (b 1997, France) *Untitled 2025* is a wall-based work that consists of readymade objects. A mass-produced mirror is dotted sporadically with small adhesive cork squares, which are used to protect it while shipping. The artist felt it was perfect as is and kept the cork patches in place. She then adhered the shipping label from the package to the face of the mirror, revealing for the work of art's production. Known for her abstract based two- and three-dimensional works that riff on both Neo Geo and hard-edged abstraction, Benslimane's work for *Ecstatic Trance* continues in the same vein: industrially produced materials are kept intact. The square cork pieces echo the grid patterns she often employs, and the lack of any fixed meaning is also emblematic of her practice.

Benslimane, an Algerian French Swiss artist, lives and works in Geneva. Growing up in a world governed by the Internet, her work reflects the overflow of information, histories, images, and styles that is available and organized in digital space. *Untitled* echoes Graham's obsession with mirroring and perception in his architectural pavilions as well as in *Rock My Religion*; indeed, when seen from afar *Untitled* seems like a recession in the wall, a portal into another dimension. When closer, a viewer is seen reflected, implicating her within the work. Like Phillips' piece, which is also reflected in part, Benslimane's work invites viewers to move through the space to experience it fully. Benslimane has noted her deep admiration for Graham, which spans from his use of two-way mirrored glass to his layering of ideas and themes, most akin to today's Internet culture.

Kathy Battista

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8th of December, 6:30pm, stattkino Luzern

Screening of Dan Graham's *Rock My Religion* (1982–84), in collaboration with the stattkino Luzern.
For more information visit <https://www.stattkino.ch/programm>

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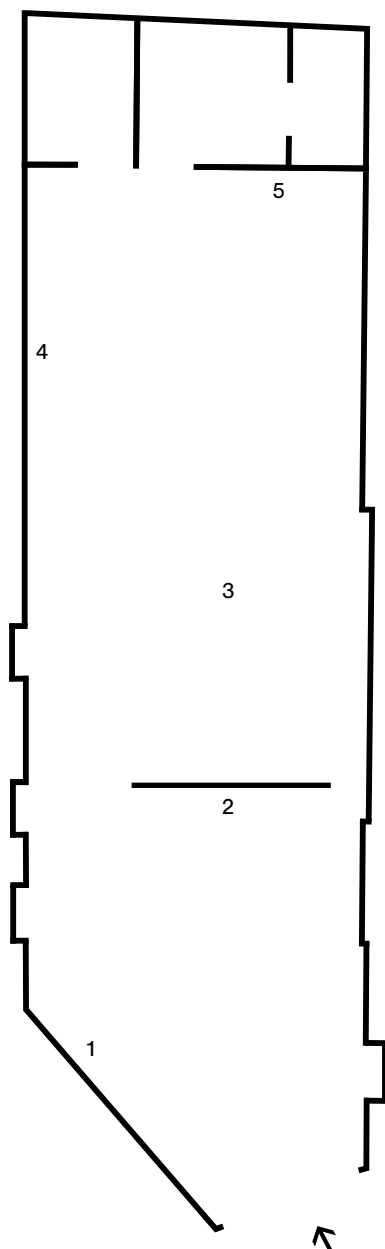
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- 1 Dan Graham
Dan Graham's Greatest Hits, Volume 1 - 21 + The Kinks, 2004–2022/2025
22 compact discs and inkjet prints
Courtesy of The Dan Graham and Mieko Graham Foundation
- 2 Diogo Pinto
Spellbound, 2025
Oil on canvas
82 × 160 cm
- 3 Ashton Phillips
Authority Complex (Mold me. Hold me. Take me. Break me. Use me for your pleasure. Be not afraid.), 2025
Clay, wire, burlap, steel, wool, stage lights, 4-channel sound work
195 × 47 cm
- 4 Samantha Box
Caribbean Colada, 2024
3D lenticular print, mounted on acrylic
101.5 × 81.3 cm
- 5 Sarah Benslimane
Untitled, 2025
Mirror, transport etiquette, cork
60 × 76 × 1 cm