

## Video Clones

Television created a subgenre of music a few years ago that can be designated as "artificial, nonexistent, techno-pop," which must be differentiated from the succeeding, garden variety of techno-pop aired today by the human/machine combinations known as the Eurythmics, Flock of Seagulls, etc. The original includes the music of The Monkees, that group of well-scrubbed faces that was put together on the basis of a casting call: musicians need not apply. Mickey, Davy, Mike, and Peter sang and pretended to play, but little did those swooning 13-year-olds who sat transfixed in front of their sets realize that groups of bona fide studio musicians were really behind "The Last Train to Clarksville." Things really became bizarre a few years later when Archie comics were turned into a Saturday morning cartoon show and Arch, Jughead, and the gang became a rock group. Scratch an oldies-but-goodies package made during the past several years and you're bound to find the Archie's big hit, "Sugar, Sugar." Who cut that record? Never mind.

One of the *groups*—a term that must be used advisedly—that will undoubtedly become one of the most talked-about (and which, perhaps, will find true success in America: a *People* cover) is Was (Not Was). It consists of two men, Don Fagenson and David Weiss, who, showing their great senses of humor, sign themselves as Don Was and David Was on their latest album, *Born to Laugh at Tornadoes* (Geffen Records). Just as Detroit has brought forth "The New Chrysler Corporation," which is nothing more than the old one with an up-to-date adjective added, the Motor City is responsible for Was (Not Was), a name with the same amount of sense.

Musically, this is techno-pop at its best (worst?): a pastiche of musical styles driven by such electronic gizmos as the Oberheim OBXA, the Vocorder, and the now-ever-ubiquitous Moog. The results

are a Motown-like ballad, "(Return to the Valley of) Out Come the Freaks," a surf-type style on "Smile," the rhythm-and-blues shouting of "Bow Wow Wow Wow," and more. The Was persons have their own Monkeesesque support in home-grown musicians including Mitch ("Sally Take a Ride") Ryder and Marshall Crenshaw. The most interesting cut, "Zaz Turned Blue," features the voice of the Velvet Fog himself, Mel Torme (who knew David Weiss as a former jazz critic at the Los Angeles *Herald Examiner*). Torme, one of the best white scat singers, has been vocalizing mellifluous

nonsense for years; there is no change here.

According to Weiss, the pair started making music because they were unsuccessful some 10 years ago, when they were teens, in picking up girls on the key suburban cruising strip, Woodward Avenue. That's true romantic despair for you, circa the late 20th century. Chances are, the lonely boys went home one Friday night, turned on the tube, watched it bleary-eyed all night long, and found their calling the following morning. Even *American Bandstand* has consequences. (SM) □

## ART

### The Ring and the Brush

**Norman Bryson: *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*; Yale University Press; New Haven, CT.**

Western painting—at least that which was produced before the advent, or onslaught, of photography in the 19th century—shares a characteristic with a trinket that could once be found in



cereal boxes and gumball machines: the flicker ring. The surface of this ring always shows an image; precisely what it is depends on the way that light impinges on it. There are three possibilities: two clear pictures and a blur. For the most part, the realist tradition has long

held sway in the West: Norman Bryson commences his discussion with Pliny's story about Zeuxis, wherein Zeuxis paints grapes that are so lifelike that birds try to eat them. In effect, the Western painter has had to act as a sort of sterilized or neutral conduit that perceives and two-dimensionally recreates the objects of perception. Bryson notes that *style*, which many now consider to be one of the key traits that makes an artist more than a painter, was long considered by the cognoscenti to be a "personal deviation." Imagine what a man from the quattrocento would do when faced with a Braque or a De Kooning. The flicker-ring nature of realist painting is this: at one angle it is a counterfeit of the actual object(s), at the other it is a pigment-covered piece of cloth. Bryson attempts to hold up the tradition at a third angle so that there is a blur, a more indistinct image. In doing so, he becomes rather iconoclastic, stating from the start that as far as he's concerned, Sir Ernst Gombrich's answer to the question "What is a painting?", "The record of a perception," is "*fundamentally* wrong." He bases his belief on his insistence that a painting is more, that

the artist is a social being who doesn't merely render what he sees in a purely optic sense because he has been conditioned to perceive various objects in the light of the culture in which he exists. Bryson then moves on to the sacred cows of semiotics—Barthes, in particular—and maintains that their formalist grids, which try to limit the boundaries of a painting to the square inches of paint, are simply deficient because “the conditions of material life” that exist outside the frame are generally ignored: “paint-



ing is embedded in social discourse which formalism is hardly able to see.”

Bryson cites Chinese painting as being, in a sense, superior to Western productions in that they are more self-reflexive: “Painting in China is predicated on the acknowledgment and indeed the cultivation of deictic markers.” That is, whereas Western painting tends to try to efface its materiality (i.e., real grapes, not paint), the Chinese brush strokes effectively call attention to themselves *as* brush strokes while simultaneously portraying a mountain or a bamboo grove. Bryson insists “that painting *as sign* must be the fundamental assumption of a materialist art history; that the place where the sign arises is the *interindividual* territory of recognition; that the concept of the sign's meaning cannot be divorced from its embodiment *in context*.” As program notes for a critical practice, these pointers are not wholly incorrect: a painted image certainly signifies more than that which it portrays, assuming that it is meant to have social currency and is not merely a

creation for the sake of itself; the perceptions of the viewers must be taken into account (e.g., whereas a Byzantine painter knew that his audience would automatically know the chapter and verse of his image, a contemporary viewer of the same thing requires a highly annotated field guide to Christian-

ity). Too great a concern with the painting as image can lead to a sterile aestheticism; too great a concern with the social milieu can lead to Socialist Realism. A fine line must be drawn with a steady hand. But Bryson's ring finger is gesticulating wildly, and the consequent blur isn't particularly illuminating. (SM)

## Images, images, ima...

**The Work of Atget: *The Ancien Régime*; The Museum of Modern Art; New York.**

**Bill Harris: *New York at Night*; Stewart, Tabori & Chang; New York.**

**Robert Freson: *The Taste of France*; Stewart, Tabori & Chang; New York.**

**Ansel Adams: *Examples*; New York Graphic Society/Little, Brown; Boston.**

**William Manchester: *One Brief Shining Moment: Remembering Kennedy*; Little, Brown; Boston.**

Photography reigns supreme and today no one would dare deny it the rank of art. Yet, we are more certain about this self-evident truth when looking at the images of Atget, who still belongs to the 19th-century tradition of the magicians of the post-daguerreotype, or to that of Adams—who is one of the most distinguished perpetrators of that legacy. We wrote about the first two albums in this series of photographs by Eugene Atget published in this country (*Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 7, No. 8, August 1983), and have acknowledged his pioneering genius, subtle significance, and priceless heritage. *The Ancien Régime* only confirms our opinion. In it, Atget consolidates with an incomparable visual consistency, our acquaintance with the grandeur and depth of what is called French civilization. Confronted with the imagery, one feels more poignantly than

ever that “*les civilisations sont mortelles*”—as formulated by Verlaine, Atget's contemporary. Emptiness and decay seem to suffuse the plates, but, oddly enough, there's something ennobling and hopeful in a Versailles without tourists. And looking at the façade of Petit Trianon through Atget's antiquated lens makes one instantly recognize how the past and present mix in French cultural destiny, and where all those great tastemakers of elegance like St. Laurent and Givenchy come from. Tradition, tradi...

*New York at Night* is exactly the opposite: both tradition and subtlety are drained off from this copious, lush volume of pictures as if a vacuum cleaner were trained on them. Only big cities live at night, while other cities sleep—which makes them no less rich in complexities and substances, just half-alive. By *big* we mean not necessarily large cities but the grandiose, mean, and ebullient—those like New York City. The images are evocative, superbly reproduced, and composed into an integral volume. They also deserve some better text. The introduction by one Mr. Soares (listed on the flap as “author of many books,” employed, at one time, by both *The New York Times* and *New York* magazine) consists of listing statistics and restaurants. The same, more or less, goes for Mr. Bill Harris, who provided the body text: he tries, rather tediously, to capture the soul of New York through the reporting of factual data. The flatness of his commentary is in reverse proportion to the vertical eruption of architectural forms that leap from the pages and