

Bruno Kreisky Forum for International Dialogue

Greil Marcus and Thomas Mießgang
"Raymond Pettibon and the American Subconscious"

Sunday, October 22, 2006, 19.00 hours

In co-operation with **KUNSTHALLE WIEN**

Greil Marcus (born 1945) in San Francisco, author, music journalist and cultural critic. In 1997 Marcus dissected the American subconscious with *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes*, a history and analysis of Bob Dylan's basement tapes. Marcus's latest book - *The Shape of Things to Come. Prophecy in the American Voice* - was published in 2006. From 1983 to 1989, Marcus was on the Board of Directors for the National Book Critics Circle. He writes the column *Elephant Dancing* for *Interview*.

Thomas Mießgang, curator of the exhibition *Whatever it is you're looking for you won't find it here*

Raymond Pettibon, US artist known for his comic-like drawings with disturbing, ironic or ambiguous captions. With more than 500 drawings and several video works, the *KUNSTHALLE wien* presents the first major Pettibon retrospective in Austria.

KUNSTHALLE wien: Whatever it is you're looking for you won't find it here. KUNSTHALLE wien, Halle 1, October 13, 2006 - February 25, 2007

Thomas Mießgang

Ich möchte Sie herzlich begrüßen. Diese Veranstaltung findet im Rahmen des Amerika Schwerpunktes, den die Kunsthalle Wien veranstaltet, statt. Er besteht aus mehreren Ausstellungen und aus einem Symposium, im Rahmen dessen Greil Marcus und verschiedene andere Leute morgen und übermorgen reflektieren werden über das zeitgenössische Amerika, auch über das Verhältnis von Amerika und Europa. Wir sind sehr glücklich, dass Greil Marcus gekommen ist, weil er für mich persönlich in meinem früheren Leben als Journalist eine unglaubliche Inspiration war, weil er einige der bedeutendsten Bücher geschrieben hat, die von populärer Musik ausgehend versucht haben, Amerikabilder zu entwerfen oder Amerika als Mythos, als Topos und als Lebensrealität immer wieder auf den Prüfstand zu stellen, Geheimgeschichten offenzulegen, die hinter den offiziellen Texten stattfinden. In diesem Sinne war er einer der bedeutendsten Autoren, der über populäre Kultur sich geäußert hat und über das Verhältnis von populärer Kultur zu den gesellschaftlichen Realitäten. Das waren vor allem die Bücher *Mystery Train*, das bereits 1970 erschienen ist, und später *Lipstick Traces*, das vom Punkrock ausgehend versuchte, eine Subgeschichte der gegenkulturellen Avantgarden des 20. Jahrhunderts zu schreiben. Wir wollen aber jetzt gar nicht über die Produktion von Greil Marcus sprechen, sondern vielleicht eher an die Themen anknüpfen, die in dem großen Interview des heutigen *Standard* waren, respektive über die Themen, die in dem Vortrag morgen zu Sprache kommen werden.

Greil, after 9/11 the relations between Europe and the States have been compromised. There were a lot of misunderstandings. Europe was furiously attacked by Donald Rumsfeld a few years ago when he coined the phrase "old Europe". On the other hand Europeans were really despising some of the activities of the Bush administration. Do you see an America under the Bush administration where a paradigm shift had happened and a completely new America had been disclosed. Do you think that what happens now, what this administration is performing, is part of America as a total entity, that it is just part of the American subconscious that sometimes is covered by maybe liberal movements depending on whatever administration is acting? Or do you think a totally new face of America has been disclosed by what happened in the last six, seven years?

Greil Marcus

First of all, when we talk about misunderstandings I don't think that they are misunderstandings. I think Europe has understood the decisions of the Bush administration very clearly. And I think the Bush administration knows very clearly what it wants from European countries or from any countries. I think

our present government wants other countries to follow its orders. I think the reaction against that has been very clear-sighted. But the real question we are asking, is this something entirely new or is this a part of America? It is certainly not a paradigm shift. When you talk about there being a new America, this is a side of America that has always been present. There has always been in the United States from the beginning large numbers of people and organized groups of people for whom democracy is at best a mask, is meant only to hide the use of parallel concentration of power. The struggle to make America democratic is the history of the country. It is a struggle that has never been won, will never be completely won. There will always be a battle between people who believe that the great moments of American history are those of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Gettysburg Address. Those pieces of paper, those speeches that say we are trying to create a government, a society where every voice is valued, every person speaks with an equal voice, every one has a right to be heard, that is the democracy to which the country is officially pledged. But the Republican Party, particularly after the Civil War, has been about concentrations of power, concentrations of money, where elections are nuisances to get out of the way, where all that is really at stake is making sure that the people who deserve to rule the country and all of its resources marshal all of its power and do rule.

I read recently a dossier put together by the American Bar Association about one of George W. Bush's recent nominations to the Federal Appeals Court in Virginia. [A nomination that in 2006 was blocked by the Senate, and which, after the Democratic Party regained the majority in the Senate after the 2006 elections, was resubmitted by Bush, and then withdrawn.] This is probably the most powerful court in the United States except for the Supreme Court. It is becoming an intellectual center of right wing jurisprudence. Many of the people Bush has appointed to the Federal Judiciary had been people who are there strictly as political appointees. They are people who have been brought into judgeships not to make judgments based on the law but to push forward policy decisions. This was a particularly interesting case. What the dossier said was, the candidate is quite well educated. In fact, his practice of law – he had never been a judge before – was respected by many people. But they felt he did not have the temperament to be a Federal Judge because he was only comfortable with people like himself. Not only did he not understand the lives of people with less money than he had, people who were not white, people who were not male. He has utter disdain for any people other than those in his really immediate social circle. And that defines very well Bush's perspective on America and the government he has put together. That is, there are certain people who are born to govern. And there are other people who are born to be governed or be ruled.

What you are seeing is something that speaks in code, that professes allegiance to all of the official promises of the United States, but has never believed in them and wants nothing to do with them. You are seeing a particularly naked face of a strain of part of America. The difference is that in the past when people have attempted to concentrate great power, to disenfranchise people and to create a society where all the powerful have power, they have done this in the name of democracy. And they have said, of course, I represent all the people, of course this government is for everyone, of course we have an open society. The Republicans who are in power now have a very different philosophy of how describe how you govern. And that is, you get 50% plus one vote in any given election and you govern as if you were elected unanimously. And that has never been done before. That is different. The masks are off. So it looks different, it seems different, and, of course, in actual policy in terms of advocating treaties, in terms of insulting allies, in terms of the lowest sorts of corruption, it is different. Because that comes with the territory. When you take off the mask things get much uglier.

Thomas Mießgang

You were talking about all the promises that come along with the idea, with the myth of America and how it is perceived in Europe because we have maybe a blurred image which is transported through music, which is transported through media and film. But there is a lot of promises coming along with

the idea of America. Do you think that these promises have never really been fulfilled, that it is always a struggle to achieve a certain goal and there is failure all along the lines of history?

Greil Marcus

Yes, absolutely. I wrote a book about that very question which is the book that was published in the United States just last month. And the argument in that book is that, here is the United States. This would be a nation dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal with liberty and justice for all, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for everyone. And this nation sends these promises out into the world, raises these flags and, of course, at the time it is a slave holding nation where only males who can meet certain property qualifications are even allowed to vote. That is the situation of the United States when it is founded. So the story of the country is an attempt to take those words, those promises and act as if they are real. And the history of the country is the expansion of those promises to everyone willing to fight for them because they are not handed to anybody. And so the history of the country is the making true of those promises in a horrendous, brutal, ugly, disgraceful struggle. However, you cannot found a nation with promises like that, that are so broad, that are so vast without them being immediately and successively betrayed. The history of our country is the making of a promise and its immediate betrayal because it is too vast to keep. And the tension between those two things, between the betrayal and the promise is what gives the country life. The betrayal becomes the engine of the promise itself.

Albert Murray is a great American critic. He was Ralph Ellison's closest friend. He is still living in Harlem where he has lived pretty much since the war. He gave a very interesting interview a few years ago where somebody was saying to him, Why do you keep saying that this is a great country, why do you keep saying that this is a good country, this was a slave holding nation, it remains a racist nation, there are forces always fighting to take away whatever freedoms we have won. He turned around and said, don't you understand that the kind of outrages that make up the history of our country somewhere else would not even be a question? He said, we have something to appeal to whenever freedoms are taken away, denied, whenever people's rights are trampled on, ignored, or stolen. He said, you have something to appeal to, you have a way of saying, that is not right, and here is why it is not right. He was simply defining this struggle, this tension that I am talking about. He is not saying, everything is great, I am an old man now and I don't care.

Thomas Mießgang

A lot of your writing is dealing with suppressed voices that manifest itself in certain forms of popular culture like when you were dealing extensively with the *Anthology of American Folk Music*. It is all about this secret text, this spectres of an old, weird America coming through in the music, but which were really not in the foreground if you are dealing with an official representation of America. There are some really great passages in *Mystery Train*. For example when this song, *Papa was a rolling stone*, was freeze-framing a certain moment in history, all that was happening, that people were parking their cars at the side of the street when the first few sounds of the song came over the radio and were just listening because they thought something extraordinary is happening. Basically it is a moment of history freeze-framed in a small artefact of popular culture. You wrote a whole book on the song "Like a Rolling Stone" by Bob Dylan where you said, this epitomizes the given time in 1965, what was happening all around. Do you perceive any cultural artefact of the contemporary world that can do this for contemporary society like these kind of songs could do in the 1950's, 1960's, or 1970's?

Greil Marcus

You are talking about democracy manifesting itself in culture. You are talking about voices that were never supposed to be heard outside of their tiny little enclave, outside the doors of their own houses, suddenly bursting into the nation at large. One of the reasons that Elvis Presley was so controversial in 1955, in 1956, it wasn't just about sex, it wasn't just about the way he moved, it was that people like

Elvis Presley, poor white people from Mississippi and Tennessee, the rest of the country was not supposed to have to pay attention to people like this. These people were supposed to know their place, and stay back, and shut up, and be quiet. And that is part of what was so shocking and what was so upsetting to so many people. And that kind of cultural explosion when many voice are heard all at once, and maybe there is a first voice that opens the doors for other people and tells other people, your voice is worth something too, have you ever even listened to your own voice, have you ever done more than sing in the mirror without making any sound, maybe now is the time to raise your voice. What happened in the 1920's was that record companies found out that when phonograph machines became cheap enough all sorts of people were buying them, and they needed something to play on those machines. The idea that you could play music in your own house was so wonderful. They also discovered that people wanted to hear music that they could hear in their own communities as a representation of themselves, of their own way of life. Walter Benjamin talks about the age of mechanical reproduction. There is also the thrill of mechanical reproduction, of hearing something that you see all the time, or that you hear all the time, be turned into a representation and it acquires magical qualities and people were attracted to that. When the record companies began to go into the southern part of the country, all sorts of people, black people, white people, male, female, Cajuns, from all different parts of the south, made records, and these records began to float around the country, and people began to hear them. And they began saying I didn't know I lived in this country. I didn't know there were people like this. But this is the most powerful, the most intriguing, the most fascinating voice I have ever heard. And I didn't even know that this was real. Bruce Conner, who is a great American artist, talks about growing up in Wichita, Kansas, and discovering a collection of these recordings from the south from the 1920's and 1930's, the *Anthology of American Folk Music* you referred to, in a public library. He said, it was as if I was watching a television documentary about a weird community in Africa or in Indonesia. He said, but it is right here, it is in my country, I didn't know my country, but now I am beginning to discover it.

Your question is, is there something going on right now that will lead to this sort of voice? You can never look at your moment or very rarely can you look at your moment and recognize history staring you in the face. History is something that we not only recognize in retrospect, we construct it in retrospect. We make it up. We look back. And we say, something was changing then. And what gave voice to that? Did the thing that gave voice to this change in fact shape or even cause the change? And you begin to wonder, you begin to ask those questions. But you almost never are going to be able to recognize it at the time. You picked a terrible example for the argument I am making: Because, in fact, when "Like a Rolling Stone" appeared on the radio in 1965 people did recognize history as it was being made. They really did say things will never be the same. The game is different now. The stakes are higher. The threat is greater. The promise is greater. But these things come down to strategy. They come down to audacity. One of the reasons people reacted that way to Bob Dylan's recording of "Like a Rolling Stone" was that it was six minutes long. It itself said, this is really a big deal. You have never heard a six-minute-song in a radio. In fact, people had, they had heard dance records that were six minutes long in the radio. They never heard a song which told a story for six minutes—and so, when this song was over the only thing that made sense in life was to hear it again. So people did say, something is happening here. I do recall when I was a freshman in college the Beatles appeared on the Ed Sullivan show for the first time. I had read about them in the newspaper. I was curious to see the show because I did not know they have rock 'n' roll in England and I was curious to see what an English rock 'n' roll band would be. I was living in a dorm at the University of California, and I went down to the common room where they had television. And I expected there would be an argument over what to watch. There were four hundred people there, all to see the Beatles. I wondered, where did these people come from. After the show an older student, a senior, said to me, As this country was once divided and brought together by Elvis Presley it may be that it will be divided and brought together again by the Beatles. It was a philosophy student. Nevertheless, he put his finger it on that that very night.

These kinds of explosions come when people feel things are good, when people feel things are getting better. Because it is in those times that people have the luxury to think about what they really want, the society they really want to live in. When you have a society that seems to be closing in, when you have a situation that seems to be more interested in taking people's voices away, then clearing space for them is much less likely to happen. Nevertheless, we might all gather here again in twenty years and say, we had no idea what you are talking about was all right here.

Question

The college life as a playground of experimental, biographical laboratory was an experience at that time. But it is not present now. The university in the United States I visit rather frequently has expanded its business and accounting schools in the last five years about 500% while all the other departments were reduced. I think that is symptomatic for the life experience in college because everybody is now a manager, a manager of his own resources, of his life, and especially of the debt people have to expect. That doesn't leave much for an attitude of experimentation or seeking alternative paths into the future.

Greil Marcus

I don't know if that is true. It is certainly true that business schools have expanded in ways that other departments have not. But we have also got a country where people work very, very hard ever since the election of Ronald Reagan made it clear that unless you have a lot of money you don't count, you don't matter, you are not even really a citizen. And that goes a long way back. To live what was considered a good life in the 1950's when autoworkers lived a good life, when you could buy a house for 7.000 or 8.000 Dollars, that is all very different. You talk about the extension of business schools—

Question

The attitude of managing oneself.

Greil Marcus

Sure. But depriving people of health care, of health insurance goes right along with that. And that is in some ways much more threatening. I don't know that there is not the same kind of experimentation going on in colleges as there has been in the past. I think college students are pretty resourceful in experimenting. I right now am teaching at one of the most success oriented colleges in the country where almost every student is expected to become a doctor or a lawyer. As the students have said to me, Princeton wants us to go out into the world, become investment bankers, make millions of Dollars, and give it back to Princeton. Whether that really puts a vice on their minds I don't know.

Thomas Mießgang

There seems to be an urge in investing in one's ego. So what about the status of collectivity in America? I think a lot of the things we were talking before came out spontaneously by the unions, by all these organized movements from the first half of the 20th century, but on the other hand by the hippie movement, the feminist movements, these were spontaneously formed collectives which tried to establish a contradictory rhetoric against the rhetoric of power. What about the status of collectivity in contemporary US? Do you see any movements coming up who could empower themselves to contradict what is happening on the level of the government?

Greil Marcus

No. One of the really shocking things about the Iraq war has been that the primary organized opposition to it, the people who organized the huge rallies or marches that you might have read about in 2002 and 2003, is an utterly thuggish, antisemitic, even fascistic small group called International Answer. They are a dedicated Stalinist type of group that stepped into the breach, stepped into the

absence of there being any other groups who were organizing to stand against what was going on. No one else was doing anything. So by default they were able to seize the legitimacy of dissent and organize it. The only other collective action on any kind of broad scale has been the protest against the World Trade Organization, particularly in Seattle, when Clinton was still President. What you are saying may have a good deal to do with that. As you were saying, it isn't just an economic squeeze, it is a sense of collectivity is a lie, I am the only person who matters. And that also is bedrock American. What America is really about is not that every little boy can grow up to be president. And now we say, every little boy or girl can grow up to be president. Part of what America is really about is, I am already president, I already run my life, I already am a master of all I see, that is my life, it says so right in the Bill of Rights, the pursuit of happiness, well, this is how I am going to pursue my happiness. Americans already believe in a certain way that they are president. Each is his or her own president. It gets kind of crowded. But nevertheless, that is a lot of what America is about when you combine that with the kind of economic realism in a very ugly situation.

Question

I do see collective action in the United States. I just see it in favor of the government, in sustaining the government from churches and from religious organizations. So the question is if the model of the American personal mindset has moved for collective action which we would not necessarily call collective.

Greil Marcus

You are obviously completely right. But I guess the reason I wasn't thinking in your direction was because when I think of collective action or collectivity or people coming together in groups for whatever purpose, they are not led top down, the way so many politicized evangelical churches are, and particularly mega churches that have 10,000, 15,000, 20,000 members. These are essentially political action committees. They are very, very hierarchical. And so I just wasn't thinking in this direction. You are right. But there is also a difference. When you talk about collective groupings in American history, at least the kind that you are talking about, you are not talking about exclusive groups. When you talk about evangelical churches you are talking about people who are living in a world of Christ and Anti-Christ, a world of the good and the bad, and we can get uglier in our distinctions. Some of these people, particularly in the Christian reconstruction movement or reconstructionist movement, want a country cleansed of a good part of its population. And that is something different.

Question

I wonder if it is so easy to say that it was always like this, America is not a democratic society. I think there are historical changes. If you think about the 1960's and how much the human rights movement has influenced democracy or democratic movements here in Europe. In my understanding of America, America is really the country and the society of contradictions. You have got both of it. Of course, you have lots of people, especially the political class that is not really looking for democracy. But you have also on the very basis time and again in American history people who really defend the right to speak, to openly speak what you want to say. That is something that is a real strength of the United States and an open society. And the possibility to change its ways, to go back from a direction. What do we have then in Europe? Do you think our democracies are better or in a better shape? I am not quite sure.

Greil Marcus

No, I wasn't saying America is not a democratic society and not a democratic nation. What I am saying is, democracy as it is defined in America can never be finished, can never be complete. That is what I am saying. I would disagree with the term political class. I think there are many people in politics in the United States today and in the past who are absolutely dedicated to making the United States a more democratic nation than it is today. Some people are and some people are not. I certainly would not say all politicians. I am not saying all heroes are the same. The whole question of the Dixie Chicks is

interesting. Does this represent a falling away from better days, that controversy comes down to a woman on a stage in London saying, **We** are ashamed that the president is from Texas. And then this big controversy over that. There are a lot of things to say about this. One is, that there were organized attempts to punish the Dixie Chicks for that by particular radio stations run by a giant corporation called Clear Channel, which runs more radio stations than any other company in the United States and which runs about half of the concert venues in the United States, to take their records off the air, to even stage rallies where their records would be burned - to the point where the Red Cross turned down a two-million-Dollar donation from the Dixie Chicks because they did not want to get involved in controversy. At the same time the Dixie Chicks appeared, all three of them, naked on a cover of an American magazine with slogans written all over their bodies, like *traitor*, and *slut*, and stuff like that. In other words, they were able to throw that back in the faces of the people who were condemning them by being even more outrageous. Because they did not back down, because they did not humiliate themselves and beg for forgiveness, well, their records are selling fewer copies now than they did before. This is not censorship. This does not mean they have been driven out. It means they stood up, took a public stance and suffered the consequences. And there are always consequences when you have the nerve to stand up in front of other people and say what you mean. However, would all matter differently if they were great artists, if they were making great art that really got into people's hearts and souls and led them to live fuller lives. But they are not. They are perfectly fine. But we are talking about things on two different levels.

Question

How do you see Raymond Pettibon in this context?

Greil Marcus

I think Raymond Pettibon goes his own way. He has pictures in the exhibition of attacking Ronald Reagan, attacking J. Edgar Hoover. Both of them are incredibly funny, and incredibly detailed, and very effective. The work that is most troubling is the stuff that portrays sexual violence and the stuff that is about the Manson family. Whether or not this is really an investigation of certain areas of American life that take place behind closed doors and occasionally spill out into the public space or whether it is simply an erotic fascination on his part that he has been able to make into sustained series of representations, I don't know, I don't have any idea. But I was thinking of Pettibon's stuff in connection with Larry Clark, and the exhibit on American photography that is going to be opened in November. There will be a whole series of images from Larry Clark which is essentially about Larry Clark and his friends in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in the 1960's and very early 1970's shooting speed. And then showing people in their coffins, showing people dead as a result of this. I was reading a long interview where he talks about how, when he was shooting these pictures one of his friends said to him, **You think this is a play, Larry. It's not a play. This is real fucking life.** And Larry said, but I did think it was a play. And then he said something very interesting. He is just ruminating, he is talking to someone. This is not a very well structured interview, he is going on and on and he says, I feel guilty about that book *Tulsa*. I feel I did something wrong, that is, going in and taking pictures of people and then putting them up before the world as representations of something fascinating or beautiful. With Pettibon there is vast distance and he feels no guilt about what he portrays. I don't see it. I think there is an insulation in his work that limits it. And one of the things that is so shocking about Larry Clark's book *Tulsa* is that there is no insulation. I remember very well when this book was first published. I saw it in a bookstore. I was riveted by this book. It was the ugliest thing I have ever seen in my life and I could not take my eyes off it. I considered buying it and I decided that I did not want it in my house. Not because it was bad, but because I thought it was dangerous. I was afraid of this book. And I remember that the bookseller in Berkeley who had started his bookstore to spread ideas, to make every kind of book available to everybody - this is the person whose store was attacked when Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* was published, windows were smashed, the store was firebombed, but he continued to sell the book - this man would not carry Larry Clark's book. He would carry fotobooks

celebrating the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia. I think there is a real difference. I think Pettibon is making pictures of other representations. One of the best things in the exhibition are whole floor displays of his sources, whether they are pop novels, old record albums, comic books, the things from which he draws his inspiration. But I don't think Larry Clark is making pictures of pictures. But he made pictures of something that had not been a picture before. And that is where the guilt comes in.

Question

Your analysis of the power elite in the United States is most convincing. However, it seems that more and more people understand what is going on in the White House which is fouling up the world in reality. There is an intellectual movement in the United States which is not only shocked about what is going, but they are furious. Two days ago I got an email from Hazel Henderson because of the upcoming elections on the 7th of November. She says, of course, we hope the Democrats will come in and it would be better for the country. However, even the Democrats would not change anything in whatever direction you were mentioning about the tightness of the power elite, not even opening the door to people who are even on the top of the intellectual world. How can change come about at all in this tight situation as you described?

Greil Marcus

First of all, I don't agree. I don't agree that if we had a Democratic president, a Democratic Congress that nothing will change. I don't agree with that all. When Bill Clinton was president, even though he was in many ways a conservative Democrat, while he was president the levels of poverty in the United States went down, and millions of people left poverty and began to manage their lives in a far more productive way because of changes to the tax code, because of all kinds of social programs that were put in place. There were huge differences, and there were great failures, and there were great instances of cowardness on the part of Bill Clinton and the Democratic Congress for the two years he had one. When it comes to the elections now, though, you can read all the polls showing that George Bush is one of the least popular presidents in history, people are furious, people realize that the Iraq war was a con, that it was a fraud from the beginning, we could go on like that. But you can't beat somebody with nobody. What the Democrats have not done is anything. They have not taken stands. They have not stepped out. They have not said This is awful, this is a betrayal, this is wrong. They just go on like this hoping that people will dislike the party in power so much that they vote for them by default. And that is not how you win elections.

Question

One can talk about the way America is and one could get back to any number of people from Europe and elsewhere discussing the kind of individualism there is in America, why without a feudal past and with a lot of immigrants the collective social mutes out to the individual that you are describing over and over. But it seems to me that we have a particular moment to analyse as well as a kind of a trans-historical leitmotif. And a particular moment has two main features. One is the disappearance of the Soviet Union so that there is no counterforce on the world scene. Europe has not become one. China, at least for the time being, has not become one. So that there is no modesty. It allows people in power to run amok around the world which is what you see. So one is the change in international constellation. And the other, I think we can all agree as to whether Clinton reflects the decay of the historical Democratic Party or not. But it seems to me that one does see in either case when you see Clinton as someone who managed to become president as did his several previous Democratic predecessors without a main space, without an institutionalized presence in labor unions and elsewhere, instead have a party which has no ideas, that has only money which it gets from Hollywood, from Wall Street, and then tries to get people to vote for them. And that is why it is completely unable to present an alternative.

Greil Marcus

I don't agree with you about Clinton. I guess you are talking that Jimmy Carter and Lyndon Johnson had the kind of institutional roots Johnson had. But the Democratic Party in the 1940's and 1950's and even into the 1960's when Kennedy was alive was a group of interest group blocs. These people came together for mutual convenience. And that did not just include labor unions, it also included the old Democratic south, it included the most racist voices in the United States. That was the purview of the Democratic Party at that time. It also included a lot of mob influence in labor unions. And it included the civil rights movement, too. People were moving away from the traditional African-American elite that was tied to the Republican Party. And Jews who were a tiny part of the electorate, but a very, very important institutional presence in the government and outside of it. The Democratic Party as such as in that formation has not existed for a long time. But also I don't agree with you that the Democratic Party does not have any ideas. I think it has plenty of ideas. They are old ideas. And most of them are good ideas. They are not very new ideas. But that does not mean that there are no ideas. As far as Clinton goes, you can say, Oh, we all agree that Clinton is better than Bush. Well, I don't know. I don't know all the people in this room and I don't know if they really agree with that. And if everyone does agree with that, maybe it is too easy to meet on that bandwagon. Nevertheless, I think what Clinton projected was real. He communicated to people that the United States of America was a more open place than they previously thought, that people who have been scorned, and disdained, and excluded have value. I think he was able to talk to people in a way that other people haven't even bothered to try to do. I think Jimmy Carter was infinitely more of an elitist in his soul than Bill Clinton. I think Clinton's election opened up the country. I made an analogy earlier this evening when I was talking about Elvis Presley. I was talking about how part of the controversy over him was that a good part of the country never expected to have to pay attention to somebody like that. Well, the Clinton-Elvis analogy has been drawn by many, many people. I even wrote a book about it, about how other people made this identification, not trying to make it myself. But the fact is that people never really thought they were going to have to look at somebody like that as their president either. George Bush, the first George Bush, went around the White House saying to people when his campaign was falling into ruins, the American people are not going to vote for some Cracker governor from Arkansas over me. Well, that was exactly that attitude. I think that when Clinton was elected a lot of people looked at that and were absolutely thrilled, the idea that this person actually was President. And an equal number were horrified on a class basis, on the lowest basis imaginable. Forget about politics.

Question

How came someone like Bob Dylan in 1965 up with something so much new and having so much of an impact today. Most likely not within the US but from some place outside, India, China or Eastern Europe. That is pretty banal to expect. But additionally perhaps we live in a very interesting situation of change insofar as also the major channels of distribution of culture more and more are international and not anymore exclusively within a US based hegemony. If you look at publishing in the US, the largest publishing company is in German hands. But more interestingly, if you look at movies, Indian movies have a wider audience worldwide than has Hollywood. The same applies to music with the additional aspect that the more globalized the culture and music has become, the more local it has become in terms of a fragmented audience. So perhaps we are at the very end of what used to be that cultural hegemony of the American environment and which has realized that it is getting more or less to a close and being replaced by different places, different people.

Greil Marcus

No figure to my knowledge has emerged from these new international channels of distribution and communication that has captured the world's imagination. When we look back at the past and say, Bob Dylan made this record and crystallized a whole moment in history and why doesn't that happen now, the real question is, how ... Because we are not just talking about policy and grand social forces. We are talking about art, we are talking about how art gets made. One of the things that goes into any great

work of art is accident, is circumstance, is choices. “Like a Rolling Stone” starts out in the studio when they are trying to record it as a waltz. And it is the most rickety thing you have ever heard. It is the least exciting, the least expansive, the least ambitious song. It is kind of like a little poem to a waltz tune. And they keep hammering away at it. And they keep trying to play it through. And it is not until about the 18th, 19th attempt that they actually play the song all the way through. Well, the version of that song that we know if we know that song, is that version, is the first time that this group of people in the studio actually got all the way through. They are just trying to get the song done, trying to learn how to play it. You realize when you listen to the actual tapes of what went on in the studio, they have been trying to record it, they play one verse. Then something goes wrong. Once or twice they get all the way through two verses. Most of the time they stop after twenty or thirty seconds. When they play all the way through the song you realize when you get to the third verse that none of the musicians had ever heard the song before up to this point. They had no idea what is coming next. They don’t know how long the song is. They are treading water. They are swimming for shore, hoping someone will throw them a life jacket. This is all desperate. And that is the only time they get all the way through the song. That’s it.

Thomas Mießgang

There is just a new record by Bob Dylan out that went straight to number one. So it seems to be a cultural item of some significance. How do you perceive this new record of Dylan? Does it do for society, for analysis of what is happening nowadays the same way then it could do it forty years ago? What is your personal impression of this new record from Bob Dylan?

Greil Marcus

It does not take much to get to number one these days. The music is so fragmented in the United States today that you can reach number one by selling 150,000 copies of an album. The fact is that Bob Dylan had been doing extraordinary work now for more than ten years. Not only his albums, but a movie that got horrible reviews but is an utterly remarkable piece of work, an amazing book that deservedly dominated the bestseller list for more than a year, a fantastic piece of writing, a real piece of writing, not just an interesting story. In fact, more interesting writing than story. A television documentary by Martin Scorsese that was a really tremendous piece of work. And Bob Dylan is out there touring 200 nights a year. This builds up to the point where he is now a legitimate cultural figure again. And there is one song on this record that I think speaks to the present moment as powerfully as anything I have heard in a long time. It is the last song called “Ain’t Talkin’,” a very interesting title for the longest song on the album that has more words in it than anything else on the album. As far as I am concerned the very first words of that song sum up the present moment perfectly. And it is not just words. The song is sung in a voice, of someone who has taken several steps back. The voice of someone who doesn’t want anyone to get too close to him. ... doesn’t want to trust anybody, who is speaking from behind a door that is only partly open. The voice doesn’t let anyone in to look him at the face. This is someone who has stepped out of the country, but is saying things about it anyway. The music is barely there. The melody is in the singing. And it is all very low-key, distant. And every word, every inflection says I am going to tell you a story, you are not going to have any idea how the story is going to come out. That is not in the words. That is his tone of voice. And the song begins: “As I went out in the mystic garden”—I looked at a fountain, I looked at the vines, and “someone hit me from behind.” That is how this story opens. *As I walked out into the country ..., somebody hit me from behind.* And it comes out from nowhere, that last line. And that opens up the rest of the song. I am only starting to listen to this. I am only starting to live with this. Bob Dylan has done things that for me as a music writer are a great affront. In the last ten years or so he put out two songs that I know as a writer I will never get to the bottom of. I will never write anything about those songs that I think is good enough. That is the challenge.

Question

Maybe I am reading too much into the remark about Pettibon . Someone else would say, isn't that a critical stance that tried to suspend too much identification. One of the problems with cultural production in the United States is really this kind of intellectualism.

Greil Marcus

When you talk about art there are always two things going on, a social dimension and an artistic dimension. With an artist there has got to be an acknowledgement that the artist is implicated in what he or she presents. Otherwise you simply have smugness and you place yourself above your subject matter and the people who might engage with it. And I don't think you get good art out of that. Any artist is, when he or she begins to create something, going to be part of the process of its creation. And that will openly take precedence over any idea with which the creation might be done. And the artist is willing to trust that his or her work will go and take the artist somewhere where he or she cannot expect to go. And I don't find that in Pettibon.

Question

The first film I saw from Michael Moore was *Roger and Me*. I think it was done not for the big Hollywood companies, it was done in a kind of free production system for the universities. It is a movie where he criticized more seriously and more interestingly than what he did later General Motors and the decline of corporate America by telling the story of Flint. That movie was supposed to be for a small public at universities, movie theaters etc. It sold very well, there was a lot of interest. So the major companies picked it up and put it in release all over the United States. As there is a lot of people, Asians, Latins, Black who maybe can't vote, for several reasons don't vote because they don't have enough money or do not speak the language, is there a subversive moment of the market? Because at least they can buy or they can decide not to buy?

Greil Marcus

I don't know. I don't know that anyone is prevented from voting in the United States because they don't have enough money. Ballots are printed in different languages at the moment. That doesn't mean that people aren't intimidated. But there are plenty of movements to bar people from voting in the United States right now, more than have been since the 1920's. There is no question about that. I don't believe the market is subversive. The market is to some degree an open field and unpredictable things do happen there. And people can find things they didn't expect to find and hear things and see things they never expected to hear or see. The American market will sell anybody anything as long as they think they can make a profit out of.

Question

Even criticism of the government?

Greil Marcus

Of course. There is all kinds of criticism all over television. Mostly it is in the form of comedy, but not only in the form of comedy. The thriller series "24" has painted a more ugly, disgusting, horrifying picture of the White House than you see anywhere else.

Question

You spoke about the changes that have come up since 9/11. Have these changes been taken up by artists?

Greil Marcus

Sure. Lots of people have tried. This certainly needs to be remembered about the attacks on September 11, 2001. The World Trade Center really was attacked by people who wanted to destroy it. This really did happen. Much of what happens since has been such a smoke screen, such a propaganda war, and so

successful. ... look back and say, well 9/11 was just a pretext for all this. Well, yeah. But it did not begin as a pretext. It was a pretext in and of itself. It had its own reality. In terms of artists addressing that, there are so many novels about well off people and how 9/11 affected their marriages. And there is lots of other stuff. But when you have an event that big it just does not get translated into art with anything that is one-dimensional because people can't see beyond it. 9/11 will enter art or it won't in ways that will not be readily apparent when it does. For example. Was there great art made out of the attack of Pearl Harbour in December 1941? No. There was *From Here to Eternity* and many years later was made into a pretty good movie. But that is not how those things enter cultures and enter art.

Thomas Mießgang

I would like to conclude this talk with a quote just to see what you make of it. "George W. Bush is Captain Ahab and the Iraq war is his white whale. He won't stop hunting the white whale until the whole nation is ruined."

Greil Marcus

No. Iraq is not his white whale. The United States is his white whale. The real target of conquest is the United States. Not Iraq.