

# GREY ART NYU GALLERY

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Contacts  
Ari Tiziani: ariana.tiziani@nyu.edu  
212/998-6789

## MULTIMEDIA EXHIBITION EXPLORES ARTISTIC OUTPUT OF DEVO FRONTMAN

### *Mark Mothersbaugh: Myopia*

On view at NYU's Grey Art Gallery  
April 26–July 15, 2017

A prolific composer, musician, and tinker, Mark Mothersbaugh (b. 1950) has also been making art since before the inception of his trailblazing post-punk band DEVO in 1973. The Grey Art Gallery is pleased to host the first comprehensive exhibition of this remarkably creative artist and polymath, *Mark Mothersbaugh: Myopia*, on view at New York University from **April 26 to July 15, 2017**. Also known for his scores for Wes Anderson movies and *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*, Mothersbaugh moves freely between the visual arts, music, film, and television. Deftly combing elements drawn from consumer culture with the handmade, he offers a rich investigation of the relationship between technology and individuality in a contemporary capitalist society.

Organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver, *Myopia* features more than five hundred objects, including original documentation, iconic costumes, and home recordings from DEVO performances; prints, drawings, paintings, sculptures, rugs, and video animations; sculptural installations; and a series of postcard-sized drawings produced over the course of five decades. Mothersbaugh will also present a concert-performance in conjunction with the exhibition.

"When Mark Mothersbaugh and his friends conceived the band they named DEVO, they considered it performance art," notes Adam Lerner, the MCA Denver's Director and Chief Animator and the show's curator. "Music was only one part of the picture—also absolutely essential was a thoughtful interpretation of de-evolution, the idea that the world is falling apart." "We thought we were doing agit-prop," Mothersbaugh concurs. "Early on I was really impressed by artists like Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg." Lynn Gumpert, Director of the Grey, observes: "It makes total sense to present *Myopia* at NYU. Not only are there great music and studio programs, but Mothersbaugh very early on understood the importance of film, again a strength at NYU, to convey DEVO's vision—which was not limited to music but encompassed the total performance with props, costumes, and narratives."

### **Exhibition**

The exhibition's subtitle, *Myopia*, refers to the artist's experience of this condition, which went undiagnosed until he was seven. Indeed, Mothersbaugh is legally blind. This optical "malfunction," in his words, inspired celebrations of mutations throughout his career. Far from myopic in scope, however, the exhibition includes work in nearly every imaginable artistic medium, presenting distinct yet interconnected aspects of Mothersbaugh's multimedia oeuvre.

*Myopia* begins with the early 1970s and the birth of DEVO, a performance art project turned popular band. Born in Akron, Ohio, in 1950, Mothersbaugh attended Kent State University, where he and his friend Gerald “Jerry” Casale—along with other founding members of DEVO—witnessed one of the defining tragedies of their generation: In 1970, the Ohio National Guard killed four students during demonstrations against the invasion of Cambodia during the Vietnam War. The day before the shooting, Mothersbaugh had taken part in these protests, and the sudden tragedy sparked DEVO’s name, with its foundational concept of de-evolution, the idea that the world is falling apart. Mothersbaugh’s first mature artwork, *My Struggle* (1974), is a 280-page book of his own writings and illustrations, taken from his student journals and featuring grotesquely manipulated found imagery. Informed by the period’s turbulence and emboldened by Kent State’s vibrant literary community, the project invokes a mordant, confrontational aesthetic that would later become linked with punk.

DEVO’s first performances were inspired by Beat counterculture literature and art. Mothersbaugh helped establish the group’s defining look, brought to life in the exhibition through original art for album covers; performance photographs depicting provocative signature outfits including matching workers’ overalls, hazmat suits, and garbage bags; and other costumes that channel Dada, Surrealism, and German Expressionism. Several original film recordings of the group’s early performances are accompanied by documentation of their high-energy, oddball stage presence, including photographs by Bruce Conner, who later made a film for DEVO’s song “Mongoloid,” an early music video. DEVO also produced their own groundbreaking short films, which were not only clever promotional efforts but also works of art in their own right.

Mothersbaugh’s vision of DEVO is epitomized in Booji Boy, a man-child character and alter ego, who is defined by his rosy-cheeked, blond-haired, full-head mask, included in the exhibition alongside DEVO’s iconic “energy dome” headwear, which the group debuted in 1980, the year of their Top 100 hit “Whip It.” Appearing on stage at DEVO concerts, Booji Boy represents individuality as a counterpart to the hard-edge posturing of the group’s robotic demeanor. The ability to locate the child in oneself and a fascination with medicine became central themes of both Mothersbaugh’s artwork and DEVO’s signature look.

His attraction to medical imagery and postwar American fiction are also integral to his art. DEVO’s self-mocking antics inform the photographic series *Beautiful Mutants*. Begun in the 1990s, these digitally manipulated, mirrored images originated from found and personal photographs, reflecting Mothersbaugh’s lifelong habit of collecting obscure historical materials. Embodying his penchant for mirroring are three versions of his five-foot-tall double-rear-ended equine sculpture, *50 Foot Tall Scale Models of Proposed Farewell Arches to Luxembourg City* (2014), painted fiberglass models for an unrealized public sculpture. Also featured is *Ruby Kusturd* (2009–14)—a droll critique of luxury jewelry and fine art—comprised of a remote-operated kinetic sculpture carved from the world’s largest ruby (30,090 carats), which resembles an ice cream cone and is mounted on a polished bronze base. Equally monumental is *Orchestrions*, which Mothersbaugh created out of abandoned organ pipes and birdcalls and has “played” in performances.

In 1986, Mothersbaugh composed the theme for *Pee-Wee’s Playhouse*, launching his career in scoring television programs and films, and extending the democratic reach of his multimedia work. Recordings of Mothersbaugh’s scores for films, including Wes Anderson’s *The Royal Tenenbaums* and *The Life Aquatic*, are presented in audio stations, highlighting the artist’s ability to move freely between visual and sonic environments.

Visitors will be able to flip through books of Mothersbaugh’s postcard-sized drawings presented on a custom-built display. A selection of over 300 examples—taken from the nearly 30,000

individual works he has made over the last five decades—traces a thread running through the artist’s visual practice. Part notebook, part sketchbook, and part personal diary, the wellsprings from which much of his work is derived, this rich visual repository provides a unique and revealing glimpse into Motherbaugh’s inner life and creative ingenuity.

### **Exhibition Catalogue**

An extensive and richly illustrated catalogue accompanies *Mark Mothersbaugh: Myopia*. Edited by Adam Lerner, it is published by Princeton Architectural Press and features a foreword by filmmaker Wes Anderson and essays by Lerner, Maria Elena Buszek, Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Colorado, Denver; Cary Levine, Associate Professor of Contemporary Art at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; artist Shepard Fairey; and Steven Wolf, a San Francisco-based writer and curator.

### **Sponsorship**

*Mark Mothersbaugh: Myopia* is organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver and curated by Adam Lerner. Funding for the presentation at the Grey Art Gallery is provided by Jane Wesman and Don Savelson; the Grey’s Director’s Circle, Inter/National Council, and Friends; and the Abby Weed Grey Trust.

### **About the Grey Art Gallery**

The Grey Art Gallery is New York University’s fine arts museum, located on historic Washington Square Park in New York City’s Greenwich Village. It offers the NYU community and the general public a dynamic roster of engaging and thought-provoking exhibitions, all of them enriched by public programs. With its emphasis on experimentation and interpretation, and its focus on studying art in its historical, cultural, and social contexts, the Grey serves as a museum-laboratory for the exploration of art’s environments.

Exhibitions organized by the Grey have encompassed all the visual arts: painting, sculpture, drawing and printmaking, photography, architecture and decorative arts, video, film, and performance. In addition to producing its own exhibitions, which often travel to other venues in the United States and abroad, the Gallery hosts traveling shows that might otherwise not be seen in New York and produces scholarly publications that are distributed worldwide.

### **General Information**

Grey Art Gallery, New York University  
100 Washington Square East, New York, NY 10003  
Tel: 212/998-6780, Fax: 212/995-4024  
E-mail: [greyartgallery@nyu.edu](mailto:greyartgallery@nyu.edu)  
Website: [greyartgallery.nyu.edu](http://greyartgallery.nyu.edu)  
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### **Hours**

Tuesday, Thursday, Friday: 11 am–6 pm  
OPEN LATE Wednesday: 11 am–8 pm  
Saturday: 11 am–5 pm  
Sunday, Monday, and major holidays: Closed

### **Admission**

Suggested donation: \$5; NYU students, faculty, and staff: free of charge