

DON VAN VLIET

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# NEW WORK

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30 NOVEMBER 1988

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THROUGH 29 JANUARY 1989

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SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM

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OF MODERN ART

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A SERIES OF RECENT

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WORK BY YOUNGER AND

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ESTABLISHED ARTISTS

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Living on a cliff overlooking the Pacific since the early eighties amid the redwood forests and wildlife, Don Van Vliet has embraced painting with the same controlled passion that made him, as the avant-garde rock composer and performer Captain Beefheart, a cult figure of conspicuous influence and one of the genuine musical geniuses of the past twenty years. Self-trained as a painter and knowing relatively little about the history of art or the current scene, he is a modernist primitive but also an artist whose remarkable intuitive gifts and love of nature have combined to create highly charged paintings that are at once jolting as well as lyrical.

The essence of Van Vliet's sensibility is a longing for an artistic expression that is direct, intuitive, and bewitching. In the philosophical tradition of the eighteenth-century French writer Jean Jacques Rousseau, he is critical of the current, corrupted state of society. Seeking to reaffirm humanity's inherent virtues like Rousseau, Van Vliet advocates embracing nature and relocating man in a position that stems from natural order rather than an imposed hierarchy. His paintings—most frequently indeterminate landscapes populated by forms of abstracted animals—are intended to effect psychological, spiritual, and magical force. In discussing his musical compositions with a critic, he also affirmed the role of the artist as wizard, saying, "You see, I don't think I do music. I think I do spells."<sup>1</sup> Image-making to him seems to be an act of reassurance, reinforcing what William Rubin has suggested in discussing the appeal of Primitive art in contemporary Western culture, that is, a process of evolving through nature a sense that the world is ordered and manageable by an animistic system of beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

Van Vliet's enthusiasms for other artists' work are limited but discriminating. He admires the emotional intensity of Vincent Van Gogh, the juicy painterliness of Willem de Kooning, and the expressive, primitivistic figuration of Julian Schnabel and A. R. Penck.<sup>3</sup> There are affinities, too, with the thick whites, automatic writing, and jagged, scratched impastos of Cy Twombly. Inscriptions do not appear on Van Vliet's paintings as they do on Twombly's, but Van Vliet invests great creative energy in devising poetic titles for his works (usually *ex post facto*). There is a revealing distinction between the literary propensities of the two artists in that Twombly's references are to heroic, classical civilization and Van Vliet's invented titles (for instance, *Parapliers the Willow Dipped*, *Tinkling Like Mercury in the Wind*, and *Light Rubber Mountains in the Distance Stretched*) invoke a magic state of nature. This contrast underlines profound differences in their approach—one through culture, the other through nature—yet reveals a common search for the aesthetic sublime that is their common inheritance from American Abstract Expressionism.

The artistic intentions found in Van Vliet's paintings closely parallel those in his music and his writing. He has said that he wants to get the same "flash, time, smell" in all his art and, in fact, his work in each medium shares common characteristics of rapid execution and prolific production, an obsession with maintaining absolute control over the formal means of expression, and a heightened interest in fraught imagery. His music can seem rawer and more radical than his painting; this may be because Van Vliet as composer and performer was pushing rock music to a level of serious artistic expression not envisioned or attempted by his contemporaries. In contrast, his visual aesthetic ideas have a distinguished history in modern painting. Since early in the twentieth century artists have



*Parapliers the Willow Dipped, 1987*

abstracted nature to create expressive and painterly new worlds of mood (as seen in the landscapes of Wassily Kandinsky of around 1912 or in the work of the early American modernist Arthur B. Dove). Van Vliet has drawn from and built on this established tradition, locating ample room within it to develop his own personal style and ideas. While he finds the technical challenges of painting more complex and demanding than composing and performing, he has discovered that, without having to breach frontiers to the extent he did in his music, painting can serve as an extremely effective vehicle for his ideas and emotions. This easier relationship between form and content results in art that is not so conflicted and difficult as is Van Vliet's music, perhaps because his imagery is quite suited to visual articulation.

Van Vliet was born in southern California and grew up there an artistic prodigy. As a child he was regularly asked to make sculpture on a television program and as a youth he executed what now would be termed a performance piece: as an aesthetic action he punched a single hole in every rose in the hedge of a Beverly Hills garden. His family moved to the high desert community of Lancaster where he intermittently attended school, became friends with Frank Zappa (with whom he invented his stage name, "Captain Beefheart": the reference is to "a tomato as big as a beefheart") and in the mid-sixties began making a new kind of rock music that drew its chief inspirations from Mississippi Delta Blues and such free jazz movement artists as John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman. In 1969 Van Vliet composed and recorded an album entitled *Trout Mask Replica*, regarded in informed circles as one of the most astounding, influential, and enduring achievements in recent rock music.<sup>4</sup> Although music was his principle concentration from the mid-sixties to the early eighties, during that time Van Vliet was also writing poetry and fiction and was painting and drawing. It was through two artists—Julian Schnabel and the German painter A. R. Penck, both enthusiasts of the music of Captain Beefheart who learned he also was a painter—that Van Vliet's work was brought to the attention of the Cologne art dealer Michael Werner, resulting in public presentation in the early eighties of what had heretofore been a private preoccupation. In 1982 Van Vliet decided to leave the music world and southern California to dedicate himself exclusively to painting in his new home on the state's northernmost coastline.

John R. Lane  
Director

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## NOTES

I am grateful to Greil Marcus, Julian Schnabel, Jan Van Vliet, Michael Werner, and Langdon Winner for their information and advice.

1 Lester Bangs, "Captain Beefheart's Far Cry: He's Alive. But So Is Paint. Are You?" *The Village Voice*, 1-7 October 1980, p. 42. Van Vliet's musical group was called Captain Beefheart and His Magic Band.

2 Douglas C. McGill, "What Does Modern Art Owe to the Primitives?" *The New York Times*, 23 September 1984, p. B1.

3 In conversation with the author, 2 September 1988. Unless otherwise noted, the source of information attributed to the artist is this interview.

4 See Lester Bangs, "Trout Mask Replica," *Rolling Stone*, 26 July 1969, p. 37; Langdon Winner, "The Odyssey of Captain Beefheart," *Rolling Stone*, 14 May 1970, pp. 36-40; Lester Bangs, "Captain Beefheart's Far Cry," *The Village Voice*, 1-7 October 1980, pp. 41-43; Langdon Winner, "Trout Mask Replica," in Greil Marcus, ed., *Stranded: Rock and Roll for a Desert Island* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), pp. 58-70; and Greil Marcus, "Van's Fate," *New West*, 20 October 1980, pp. 91-94.

## DON VAN VLIET

Born in Glendale, California, 1941  
Lives and works in northern California

### SELECTED INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS

1985  
Galerie Michael Werner, Cologne  
Mary Boone Gallery, New York  
1986  
Waddington Galleries, London  
1987  
Galerie Michael Werner, Cologne  
Galerie Brinkman, Amsterdam  
1988  
Galerie Michael Werner, Cologne

### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1982  
*Performance Video*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York  
1985  
*From Organism to Architecture*, New York Studio School  
*The Chi-Chi Show*, Massimo Audiello Gallery, New York  
*Factura*, Gallery Schlesinger-Boisanté, New York  
1987  
*Byars, Chamberlain, Salle, Fischl, Lasker, Van Vliet*,  
Galerie Michael Werner, Cologne

### SELECTED SOURCES

#### BY DON VAN VLIET

*Skeleton Breath, Scorpion Blush*. Introduction by A. R. Penck.  
Bern/Berlin: Verlag Gachnang & Springer, 1987.

"Four Poems and Three Drawings." *Conjunctions* 3 (1982),  
ed. Bradford Morrow, pp. 135-39.

*Safe as Milk* (1967), *Strictly Personal* (1968), *Trout Mask  
Replica* (1969), *Lick My Decals Off, Baby* (1970), *The Spotlight  
Kid* (1972), *Clear Spot* (1972), *Shiny Beas: (Bat Chain Puller)*  
(1978), *Doc at the Radar Station* (1980), *Ice Cream for Crow*  
(1982). Recorded albums.

*Lick My Decals Off, Baby*, 1970. 16mm, 1 min., b/w.  
*Ice Cream for Crow*, 1982. Videotape.

#### ON DON VAN VLIET

Dickhoff, Wilfried. *Don Van Vliet* (exhibition catalogue).  
Galerie Michael Werner, Cologne, 1988.

McKenna, Kristine. "Don Van Vliet." *Emigre*, no. 2 (1985),  
pp. 24-25.

Miller, Jim (with Janet Huck). "Captain Courageous."  
*Newsweek*, 20 October 1980, pp. 86-90.

O'Brien, Glenn. "Don Van Vliet, Museum of Modern Art."  
*Artforum*, vol. 21, no. 6 (February 1983), pp. 76-77.

Parales, Jon. "Painting with Melody." *The New York Times*,  
18 December 1985, p. C23.

Peel, John. "Yellow Brick Road Revisited." *The Observer*, 6 April 1986, p. 29.

Penck, A. R. "Don Van Vliet," *Tema Celeste*, no. 2 (April 1987), p. 55.

Penck, A. R. *Don Van Vliet* (exhibition catalogue), Galerie Michael Werner, Cologne, 1985.

Penck, A. R. "Na, Na, Na—for Don Van Vliet." *Don Van Vliet* (exhibition catalogue), Galerie Michael Werner, Cologne, 1987.

Rense, Rip. "Captain Beefheart: A Portrait of the Artist as Loner." *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, 15 October 1982, pp. D-5, D-28.

## CHECKLIST

*The Moon a Pail of Milk Spilled Down Black in the Night*, 1986  
oil on linen  
80 x 70" (203.2 x 177.8 cm)  
Collection of the artist

*Bat and Cat Panda*, 1987  
oil on linen  
64 x 51½" (162.6 x 130.8 cm)  
Collection of Jan Van Vliet, California

*Feather Times a Feather*, 1987  
oil on linen  
64 x 51½" (162.6 x 130.8 cm)

*Parapliers the Willow Dipped*, 1987  
oil on linen  
78 x 58" (198.1 x 147.3 cm)

*Cardboard Cutout Sundown*, 1988  
oil on linen  
58 x 48" (147.3 x 121.9 cm)

*The Corn Thief*, 1988  
oil on linen  
58 x 48" (147.3 x 121.9 cm)

*White Tree and Black Gate*, 1988  
oil on linen  
58 x 48" (147.3 x 121.9 cm)

*Unless otherwise noted, all works are courtesy Galerie Michael Werner; Cologne, Federal Republic of Germany.*

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**"New Work" is generously supported by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's Collectors Forum and the National Endowment for the Arts.**

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The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is a member-supported, privately funded museum receiving major grants from the California Arts Council and Grants for the Arts of the San Francisco Hotel Tax Fund