an interview with

KIM GORDON

By Pamela A. Ivinski

So I think that Dirty is Sonic Youth’s best album. Really, I do. I know that admitting to this is a major faux pas in the world of alternative rock, where early work is fetishized, but I’m beyond the point where I care. If I did, I might try to establish my alternative credentials, you know—I saw Nirvana at the Pyramid. But this example only goes to show how tenuous alternative credentials are. For all my post-structuralist pretensions, I’m an old-fashioned modernist when it comes to rock-n-roll. The fact that I scoff at the idea of authentic experience in my intellectual life doesn’t mean that I’ve stopped searching for it in my emotional life. Sonic Youth’s music has always scared me for this reason: It reenacts the death of authenticity.

For me to embrace Sonic Youth before Dirty would have meant two things. First, it would have forced me to question the easy pleasures of pop’s appeal to body and non-mind, at a time when I needed sublimated sexual release and a means of descent into stupidity. And second, it would have pointed out the many inadequacies in my budding intellectual identity. Why suffer graduate school hell when the same issues can be addressed through noise music?

Maybe Dirty wouldn’t mean so much to me if I didn’t know what preceeded it. I don’t hear it as a compromise or a sell-out; I trust Sonic Youth’s intelligence too much for that. I think Dirty is even more subversive than their earlier albums because it seduces with melody and closure without ceding any previously-conquered territory. I’ve long identified myself as a Sonic Youth fan, but until Dirty I was more entranced with their asexual persona, especially Kim Gordon’s, than their music.

Kim is ubiquitous, that is, if you know where to look. Not just on the streets of New York and Los Angeles, but also in the pages of Artforum, the Village Voice, The New Yorker, Harper’s Bazaar, and countless fanzines, as writer, subject, and object of delection. Though I’d promised myself I’d never speak with one of my idols again (disappointing encounter with Urge Overkill), the prospect of interviewing Kim was enticing. After all, we seem to have some things in common. The interview process itself made me uneasy, though Kim could not have been more polite and cooperative. I mean, I know how to talk, but to have the entire burden of the “conversation” fall upon me was a test of my ego. And then, in writing it up, I was dismayed to find myself relatively absent from the text. Hey, my name’s going on this interview, too!

Therefore, I’ve felt compelled to introduce Kim with this preface detailing what I think about Sonic Youth and Dirty.

So who cares what I think?

In a recent Rollerderby interview about the body, you talked about getting frumpy at the same time you started getting brainy.

Oh yeah, that’s art school.
Where did you go to art school?

I went to Santa Monica College for two years, and then I went to school in Toronto at York University for a year and then to Otis Art Institute.

And were you in bands all that time?

I was in a band at York University with this friend of mine who is a pretty well-known percussionist, a guy I went to high school with, and these two Chilean guys who were really funny and really serious, and then this girl. We would sing, me and the girl. We played at the Ann Arbor Film Festival. They pulled the plug on us. We were really noisy. Actually, Mike Kelley saw us play there, which is amazing to me. He said it inspired him to make noise music.

I thought about going to art school, but I went to a tiny high school and I was worried I wasn’t going to get any regular classes.

Right, my parents didn’t want me to go to art school. My father was in education at UCLA and even though I had art classes all my life, for some reason he thought that art schools were just for dilettantes. That’s what you did to get by for four years. Even though I was a horrible student in high school, I mean, what he thinking? They weren’t really big on the art school thing.

It’s pretty obvious from your work that you read all the time.

I used to read just non-fiction, but then when I decided to become a musician [laughs] I decided to read just trash. I decided that I thought too much.

Do you still think you think too much?

No, now I think I’m brain dead. My brain died of misuse. I feel like I’ve reverted to my high school vocabulary [laughs]. I’ve never been a very verbal person, I’ve expressed things in visual arts.

But, from what I’ve read, you don’t really dabble in the visual arts anymore.

No, not really. I would like to, but I don’t really have the time. You have to do one thing or the other, but I think I’ll always see things as a visual artist and have that attitude. I still don’t think of myself as a musician. If someone said, oh, we want you to be in this show, or you can do a show, I would make some art, but I really need a deadline.

What kind of stuff were you doing when you were in art school?

I painted, and then I did more conceptual stuff. I did things with psychological interiors, decorators. I’d go in and do something physical and then something psychological, like put a painting on a wall or change the rug, and then I would write about it and reprint it in a magazine. Then I did stuff with found photos, like pictures of young movie stars like Matt Dillon. I’d print them on acetate and do things with them.

When you started Sonic Youth it seems there was a closer tie between artists and musicians.

Yeah, I don’t know if you’re familiar with Nw-, but when all those bands started up it was before people like Robert Longo and Cindy Sherman were into their careers. They were young artists living in New York and they were into going to shows. I don’t know what happened, that scene sort of died out. It became really separated. Either you did really experimental music like John Zorn or more serious composer stuff. When we started up we didn’t really want to align ourselves with the art world because we weren’t writing music we could get grants for, and we weren’t really doing improv like those people. So when the hardcore scene came along, even though we weren’t hardcore, we could kind of align ourselves with that network of distribution. And people were definitely more interested in us in Europe because of our arty image, but for the most part, anywhere else it worked to our detriment.

In this country art has an intellectual taint and people don’t want music and intellect to go together.

America’s not an intellectual country, and they really don’t care about art. In order to have a successful exhibition it has to be fun for people and that’s okay. If you were a band from New York, you had a reputation for being too cool for school and wearing all black and being junkies. That was as much ascribed to you as being arty, so we really tried not to wear black and stuff.

Do you keep up with SoHo now?

There are a few artists whose shows I try to see. It’s hard to keep up, but I like Feature Gallery. I like Tony Oursler’s work. There’s a lot of interesting stuff.

Do you know people like Mike Kelley from music or art?

I know them from the art world. Mike and I didn’t go to the same school but we met right after graduation and became friends.

Tell me a little bit about your CalArts lecture.

I took this videotape that this sixteen-year-old girl sent of herself painting the Raymond Pettibon drawing from the Goo cover on her bedroom wall, huge-sized. It was amazing, it was almost like watching a performance, being inside the mind of a sixteen-year-old. She talked into the camera, she was doing it all to get to meet us. She figured if she went to all this trouble that she would. At the end of the tape she gives directions to her house—from the airport you go down Route 66, and you turn left at the Burger King—it’s really, really funny. So I showed that, and then I showed slides of each of our record covers and...
I don’t know, maybe. It really took a long time to write. I like writing, but it’s sort of a luxury.

I read Steve Albini’s tour diary in some fanzine. It made him out to be a compelling figure, but it was also just what you’d expect. There’s a scene where he describes having sex with a prostitute, sharing her with everybody . . .

Oh right, I’m not sure if that was real or not. He has a tradition of lying.

I guess it doesn’t matter if it was real or not.

Yeah, that’s right.

But in your piece, and in 1991: The Year Punk Broke, you show the surface of things in a way that fascinates, but you never let anybody in. Especially in the movie, I went thinking, I’m really going to see what these guys are like, but then the voice-over kept everything at a distance.

Actually, touring is pretty boring—there’s a lot of sitting around. We really don’t do drugs, or have orgies. Like the Robert Frank movie, Cockshucker Blues, even if it was just surface, you’d still see people shooting up. Ours was a fake documentary in a way; documentaries are sort of bogus. I’m really not into exploiting my personal life for gain or for entertainment. It’s hard to write about something when you’re in the middle of it. I don’t mind making myself vulnerable in songs. I think that’s important.

I think not exploiting your personal life is important—that’s what women have traditionally done: this is my body, this is my life. Part of being a performer is giving people permission to take you into their lives, but that must be really frightening, too.

Yeah, some people are just into that, someone like Courtney Love is totally into exploiting every angle. Her husband, the fact that she’s married to Kurt, and the baby. That’s fine, but I’m just not that kind of a person.

If you’re a fan of Feature Gallery, you must know Kathe Burkhardt’s work, the Liz paintings.

Yeah, I like her work; it’s great.

I’ve always wanted to do something about her work and J.G. Ballard’s Crash and the whole Liz Taylor thing. In “Boys Are Smelly,” you say, “I don’t want my blood to be entertainment.”

There’s a certain line, I mean, maybe that’s what separates me from a truly great performer [laughs]. Who wants that kind of fame? You have to really want that, and it’s really unnecessary as far as I can see. I wouldn’t mind the money . . . Sonic Youth has always been the kind of band that is definitely in it for history and not for the money.
Sonic Youth is very much about New York. It seems like it would be a pretty good place to live if you have some fame, because most New Yorkers wouldn't bother you.

Yeah, people pretty much leave you alone. I spend a lot of time in L.A. because I grew up there, I'm as bad a star spotting as anyone, but I rarely go up to someone. It's funny, you do feel empowered if you're a fan. I remember seeing that comedian, Stephen Wright, at a phone booth, and I walked up to him and said "You're really great," and he was totally taken aback. It's almost like a way for people to have control over you, and I do it every chance I get just because it makes me feel so much more powerful than someone coming up to me and saying "you're a role model" or whatever. Even though it's nice when you see young girls and you know they're into you, it doesn't make you feel powerful. But going up to someone else does.

I see you around New York all the time, and it's strange, because I never see people I know.

New York's great that way, everyone's thrown in together. I used to see Andy Warhol everywhere, I saw Paul Shaffer on the street once, before we were on the show. It's weird, people think they know you because they're familiar with you from seeing you, and you don't know sometimes who you really know and who you've met.

Do you get a ton of mail?

We don't get, like, thousands of letters. We have a fan club.

Do you ever become friends with fans?

No, not usually. I don't really write people back. Every now and then, if it's a young girl or something. Then you just become pen pals, and I'm a terrible letter writer. I could count the letters I've written in my whole life. I don't even see any of the crazy letters.

Do you still consider yourself a fan?

What are you into now?

Like, what am I obsessed by, or something? I'm sort of interested in the Heidi Fleiss thing, but I don't dwell on it. Actually, this is sort of sick, but before I met Evan Dando I was fixated on this alternae-hunk thing, you know, what's up with that. What's even sicker is that he's really into young girls. We (Free Kitten) were in L.A. playing at Lollapalooza, and these two twelve-year-old girls were there. Evan ended up making out with one of them. I thought, that's so, so sick. Maybe when they're older they'll look back and realize what a jerk he really was. There's the Loni/Burt thing.

How about Michael Jackson?

That's kind of intriguing, because that's what you think anyway. It's so horrible that I can't believe it's possible. The thing that bothers me is, why does he dress the way he dresses? He's such a non-sexual person, he must not have any relationships. He pretends to abhor any kind of sexuality, he's a Jehovah's Witness, but then did you see what he was wearing on tour? I think it was tight leather pants, and then something like a body suit that was fastened on the outside. It was really bizarre.

The Madonna influence going the other way.

Yeah, but what kind of message is he sending out? Maybe if he truly is not sexual he has no perspective on it, like when he did that video that was really violent.

How does pop culture affect your work?

After "Tunic" and the Carpenters thing, I felt like people wouldn't take seriously the fact that I really liked the Carpenters. It wasn't about liking kitsch, or The Partridge Family, though you could make an interesting case for The Partridge Family or whatever. I was afraid that people would look at it as novelty: "Oh yeah, they like pop culture." I didn't intend it to be superficial.

You must have liked Todd Haynes's film, Superstar.

Yeah, it's a great film, it was better than the TV movie. Karen's anorexia—it's symptomatic that there's something wrong with this country. The fact that she had no control, except over her body.

Do you identify yourself with feminism or any feminist causes?

I guess so, though I find feminist ideology too strict in a way. I don't necessarily get along with strict
feminists because I find them intolerant of some things. I like a looser interpretation of things.

Do you read any feminist theory?

Not really. The whole Susan Faludi thing—it's all dogma, it's self-serving. It's kind of narrow. It's an updated version of what was written in the seventies. Which is fine, but I wouldn't buy into it lock, stock, and barrel. Frankly, I haven't read it [laughs]. But I've read enough to know what it's about. The little battles. Camille Paglia is an ass. She's a celebrity, a sensationalist. She just wants to be famous. She said some really stupid things in that interview in Spin. She's totally unaware of what's gone on in music since the late seventies. It's embarrassing. She's obviously reacting against the academic world, but everybody hasn't had that experience.

Has she ever had anything to say about you?

I don't think she knows I exist.

Just Madonna . . .

Madonna, Courtney Love. I think Courtney must have called her: "I love your work, please write an article about me."

Are you still interested in Madonna?

Less and less. I'll always be interested in what she does, but her music has gotten worse and worse. If her music really stood up, I don't think people would care about the backlash about her image. She's a horrible actress. I couldn't believe how bad she looked in Body of Evidence. Her screen presence was disturbing, somehow it made you aware of her physical limitations. Suddenly, she looked small, her checks looked weird. Is that a shadow on her lip? How could she allow that? I was surprised, she's so photogenic in her videos.

What was your take on her when you did The Whitey Album?

We really liked "Into the Groove." That whole record, Like a Virgin, we were genuinely into it. It was fresh sounding, good dance music. The way she dressed—any girl could dress like that—she wasn't wearing expensive designer clothes. But no one can stay the same.

I loved the duet with Madonna on that—recording yourself along with her when you know she wouldn't have anything to do with you in real life.

Surprisingly, she didn't sue us. She's smart that way. I was looking in People magazine this issue, it had this thing on the wealthiest women, and I was surprised that Madonna wasn't number one. I knew Oprah was probably the wealthiest, but there were several people ahead of Madonna. She had like $100 million, but Oprah had $200 million. It was so insane.

How do you feel about being Harper’s Bazaar's "icon of the moment"?

What was that one? Oh right. I wasn't really into that picture. I'm actually starting my own line of clothes, with my friend Daisy Von Furth. It's going to be called "X-Girl," for that clothes store "X-Large." We're going to make clothes that—hopefully—look flattering on everyone. Affordable.

Have you done any designing before?

No. My mom sewed.

Do you get approached by a lot of people with causes?

It's hard, you don't want to be part of the hack benefit circuit, but on the other hand, usually our best shows are when they're free, when we're not feeling as much pressure.

Do you know Gerhard Richter?

I've met him, I used to know his wife, she was a friend of mine. I think the reason why he gave permission was because of her, she said it was good to do something pop culture. He likes us, but I was a little surprised that he allowed us to use the image. He's one of my favorite artists. I like Ed Ruscha as well.

You're an unusual case in that you've been able to make a career out of your band.

That's true, we're really amazed. When we did the Neil Young tour it was so bizarre, playing for his audience. Sometimes it was fun. I learned not to look into the audience, because you'd always see some old hippie guy giving you the finger, or some guy laughing.

Are you still into rap, hip-hop?

Yeah. There's a lot of bad rap, but just like rock-'n'-roll, most of it's mediocre. I like Cypress Hill, Beastie Boys.

When you worked with Chuck D, it was a good match, for sheer intelligence value.

Yeah, but he wasn't used to rapping along with something that slow. And when he opened his mouth, every rap cliché came out. "Word up." We were working in the same studio, it was fairly natural. We just did a song with Cypress Hill, but I felt funny making suggestions to them about the music. Maybe it's my imagination, but I think they have this really conventional idea of a "girl."

What about women rappers?

I like Boss, she's really cool. I'm directing a video for the Breeders. I used this Dan Graham idea from those early performance pieces with mirrors—I stuck a big mirror behind the band so you can see the crew and the camera and the whole thing. It came out really good.

That's great: mirrors with the twins.

Yeah, it's so tempting. They're hard to work with because they don't want to be categorized in any way, so the things you naturally want to do, they're very sensitive.
Twins are my favorite sitcom device.

Oh yeah, I love the Patty Duke Show.

Another question about your audience—I always liked that arrogant remark of Perry Farrell’s, about breaking up Jane’s Addiction when people he didn’t think were cool starting getting into the band. It’s horrible, and admirable.

Yeah, but I don’t think Perry’s dedicated to that idea too much. Like I’ve heard Kurt complain about having a lot of jerky fans, but you can’t be a fascist about who likes you. If you don’t want a large audience, make noise music or something. Why do commercial things if you’re worried about that?

As you’ve done you’re own work, have you had some idea of your audience in mind?

Not really. I think you make music for yourself. We’re influenced by what’s going on around us, but our audience keeps getting younger and younger, because of MTV. Which is nice, but bizarre; it’s not like we’re making teeny-bopper music. It’s kind of scary sometimes when your audience is too big, you feel too responsible. When we have to do a big show, we can’t just play for forty minutes, we’ve got to do better. It’s kind of a burden.

What about your interest in the teenage persona?

I don’t know, maybe it’s just not wanting to grow up. Celebrities always want to be adolescents forever; that’s the appeal, that you don’t ever have to be responsible.

You’ve been cast in a parental role toward younger bands. Is that something you try to foster?

I don’t know, but when I was doing the Free Kitten tour, these little girls, I don’t know how old they were, like thirteen, they’d ask me if I’d be their mom. They’d be like, “I wish you were my mom.” No one wants to be that, it’s not a very glamorous thing to aspire to. Rock-n-roll mom.

Are your Free Kitten fans mostly girls?

Yeah, they are. Some of them are Sonic Youth fans, but it’s mostly young girls. I hope so, I think it’s sweet.

What’s the scene like in front of the stage when it’s mostly girls?

I don’t know—their little faces. It depends where we play.

What about stage-diving?

I think it’s sort of a drag. I don’t like it when people come up on stage, they knock the microphone into your teeth and they unplug all the cords and boxes and stuff. It’s a drug for everyone else, and then they kick all the little girls.

Did you ever meet the girl who made the video?

She came to our show in Buffalo; that’s where she lived. She and her friends, we brought them backstage, and they stood on the side of the stage. She was really nice. She was, I guess, a year older by that time and we were afraid she wasn’t going to be into us anymore.