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The Grateful Dead Photography of Roberto Rabanne

NICHOLAS G. MERIWETHER

Synesthesia. For Owsley Stanley, legendary underground chemist, Grateful Dead benefactor and sound engineer, that was one of the most profound experiences of the Acid Tests, the freeform concerts-cum-happenings where the Dead really emerged as a band. “I actually saw sound coming out of the speakers,” he explained in an interview (Gans 2002, 295). It surprised him, on many levels, perhaps most of all because it showed him how centuries of human learning and experience could find expression in ways that transcended ordinary Western consciousness, even the idea of consciousness. Small wonder that after he left his work as a chemist and as an engineer behind, he would turn to art to express his visions.

That was the bigger lesson of the Haight-Ashbury, and by extension, of the counterculture and the 1960s: that life could be art, even if living up to that ideal remained as elusive and difficult a challenge as it always has been. For Roberto Rabanne, like Stanley and so many of his friends and peers, that was the clarion call of the Haight. And nowhere did that call sound more clearly than in the music of the Grateful Dead.

Rabanne was there at the beginning, and with his camera recorded the Dead for over forty years. Born in Panama and raised in the Catholic

Church, Rabanne brought an artist's sensibility to the burgeoning psychedelic scene in the Haight-Ashbury. After time spent in New York's East Village, he migrated to San Francisco following the Beats, staying in Neal Cassady's apartment near the Fillmore before finally settling in the Haight, just as it began to take shape as the City's newest bohemia. Filled with North Beach expatriates, disaffected Beats, and San Francisco State students, the Haight was a mixed-race, largely working class neighborhood that welcomed the newcomers with cheap rents, wonderful housing stock, and close proximity to Golden Gate Park. It was a perfect spot for young artists.

When Rabanne saw Garcia on Haight Street one afternoon in 1966, he struck up a conversation with him, and so began another of the many friendships that knit together the burgeoning community that would soon put a name to the counterculture. "We bonded over Latin culture, talking about my childhood in Panama, Garcia's father's Spanish heritage, our interest in art," Rabanne recalls. But their conversations took on an urgency as life in the Haight accelerated. When Rabanne first saw and heard the Dead, he had an epiphany: "The music, the sound effects, the lights, the immersion of the concert experience—as a visual artist, it all fascinated me, especially when I realized that I could translate the music into visual art."

At first Rabanne participated directly in the sensorium, contributing film loops and early light show effects to the Dead's concerts at the Fillmore and Avalon, but photography was the root of those efforts, and it held the greatest appeal for Rabanne. Of all of the arts, photography struck him as the one perfectly suited to expressing the zeitgeist of the Haight, and the Grateful Dead phenomenon as it emerged from that countercultural chrysalis. "I had to document it because it was so fleeting," Rabanne remembers. "We were changing everything, and we knew it." Photographs could capture those changes: it was an art form as instantaneous and in-the-moment as life in the Haight was, unfolding in an artistic and all-enveloping now. And photography married technology and art in a way that also defined the bohemias developing in the Haight and the East Village in New York, along with the pageantry and mystic ritual of psychedelic experience. They were all currents at play in the community that

coalesced around the Dead, finding expression in the music, the dance, even the posters advertising the concerts, which seemed to expand and stretch and unfold in a viewer's eyes, rewarding close examination the way the music rewarded deep listening.

For Rabanne, the scene, and especially the Dead, represented a forum that offered the opportunity to fuse all of his disparate influences and express them visually. "I was interested in the 1930s Dada movement, the Surrealists, anything to do with expanding my consciousness," he explained recently. "I was reading Jung and Aldous Huxley, but also thinking of art history, from Fra Angelico and medieval illuminated manuscripts to Andy Warhol and Popism." He saw a similar eclecticism in the Dead's approach, one fueled by a simpatico vision. "They were doing with their music what I saw the Surrealists doing with visual arts: taking the traditional and reworking it to create a tour de force." They were not only making it up, they were making it new.

Most of all, they were also connecting, both consciously and unconsciously, with centuries of visionary art in the West. And that was what Rabanne found especially intoxicating. As poster artists and light show designers tapped into that heritage, the Haight forged its own link between the medieval and the modern, finding a psychedelic subcurrent that connected them to older, deeper artistic precedents. That subcurrent lay hidden in the art and buried in the culture, simply waiting to be rediscovered, an ancient fount that Rabanne and the Dead and so many of their Haight-Ashbury peers and friends would tap to nourish their own counterculture. Theirs was not a retrograde vision: they were keenly aware of recent trends in the art world; they understood how Pop art recognized the energy and expressive power of the new, wrestling it free from the pabulum of mass culture. It was all fair game, uniting an open-minded optimism about the future with a sharp-eyed appreciation of the past to create a canvas broad enough to let everyone paint.

Rabanne continued to contribute to light shows, including groundbreaking collaborations with Josh White of the Joshua Light Show, but photography quickly emerged as his chief artistic outlet. It seemed especially suited for his interest in the Dead. Rabanne was one of several gifted photographers who saw more than a passing congruency between their

medium and the band as a subject. Part of this was the Dead's capacity to challenge, even as they affirmed. Much like the Dead's music, photography as an artform has beguiled critics and confounded scholars since its inception. We understand that photographs are multisensory objects and problematic documents; yet after four decades of "the theoretical demolition of the photograph's reality effect", as Elizabeth Edwards put it (2010, 21), we are still drawn to what one historian called "the challenge that has driven photojournalists from the beginning: how to make the human race visible to itself" (Lacayo 1995, 9). Scholars have explored and interrogated photography using a wide palatte of ideas: the gaze and engagement; the visible and the implied; photographs and representation, as well as misrepresentation. Yet even the most strident critics acknowledge the history that photographs invoke: They remain traces of a vanished past, stubborn moments in time that breathe anew, every time we look at them. Ultimately, photographs can be a refusal to give up the past for dead—which makes the Grateful Dead photography of Roberto Rabanne even more compelling.

The old dichotomy between the photograph as art and the photograph as document collapses with his work, in part because Rabanne's subject and his art were so deeply linked. His photographs of the Dead were an organic extension of the art they documented, born of the same place and time and spirit, which made each image an allied expression of the art it immortalized—the same ethos and ideals informing and linking art and artist, subject and object, eliding the gulfs between them in profound and powerful ways.

This is not to say that Rabanne's photographs reassure. Rather, when they remind, it is with that flash of memory, burnished bright by the intensity of lived experience. Art is always confrontation, however limned by beauty. A photograph is an invitation to explore not only the joy and ecstasy of life but also its discomforts: trial and trauma, the pains and pangs of learning, growing, and aging. In so doing, they also prompt us to rediscover, to reaffirm, to reclaim, taking the forgotten or unknown or estranged and rendering it usable, immediate, intimate—the way Robert Hunter told us in "Lady With A Fan" that storytelling could make "things we've never seen ... seem familiar."

Rabanne's photography does all of that. It is more than just his response to the timeless challenge of making the human race visible to itself, it is his particular reframing of that problem: to find the humanity and the effort—the sweat and the joy—in the art of the Dead and fix it, for a fraction of a second, so that history can outlive that fragile, precious evanescence, and endure. That is why Rabanne's photographs are more than just a window into a past already receding. They are an expression of the values that animated the Grateful Dead and made them his subject, one allied with the same fundamental ideal that gave them their name: a folk motif that bound together so many ancient folk stories, all describing how we should honor the past with no thought of reward, which is ultimately its own reward. And that, too, was something the band members recognized. That democratic inclusiveness, that sophisticated grasp of the gossamer but sinuous connections that can link artists working in vastly different media: all of that was bound up in a name that also suggested how that ideal could be vast and vital and sustaining.

It could also be renewed. This is why the phenomenon of the Grateful Dead includes the photography of Roberto Rabanne. His photographs go to the heart of the Dead's promise—and shows what it offers an America still riven by arguments over the meaning of the sixties, the counterculture, and the legacy of the Haight-Ashbury.

Synesthesia is the transposition of one sense to another: seeing sound, hearing sight. At heart, though, synesthesia evokes the idea of transformation: not just perception, but reality; changing ourselves and our world, converting one form to another, not unlike the medieval alchemy that sought to transmute lead into gold. Rabanne's photographs not only transmuted one art form into another, they fixed a transitory present, distilling the fleeting face of history into memory. Just as the name "grateful dead" implies, there is an ethical dimension to that kind of transformation, one that Owsley sensed and that Rabanne and the Dead embraced—one that still cries out from the protean music the Dead created, and the striking images that Rabanne recorded, all rooted in the energy and ideas of that time and place. For over forty years, that energy and those ideas persisted, harnessed by the remarkable power of the Dead and frozen in

the images Rabanne witnessed. It was a pleasure to see those brought together at last and presented at an exhibition on the fiftieth anniversary of the band whose work did so much to inspire him, and whose work he did so much to preserve. With those photographs, we can all share in that past, a magic that would otherwise be lost.

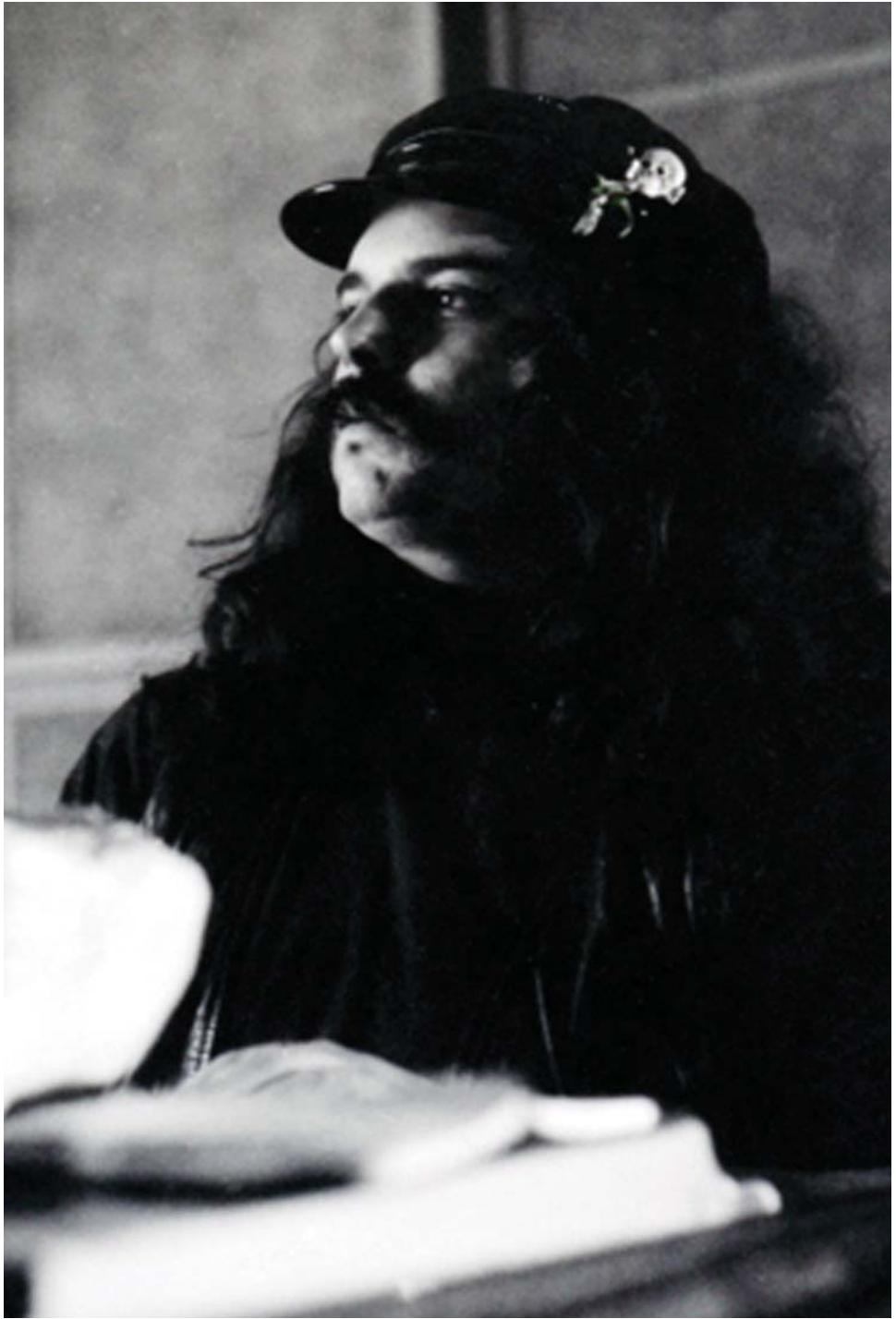
NOTE

A version of this essay is slated for publication as the introduction to the exhibition *A Furthur Photographic Trip with the Grateful Dead* (2015).

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Ron "Pigpen" McKernan

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