

Kruger, Barbara. "On Playing With Matches," *Artforum*, May 1998.

# ARTFORUM

BECK AND AL HANSEN

TAKE A LISTEN TO THIS. "Rubbish piles, fresh and plain. Empty boxes in a pawn shop brain. License plates stowaway. Standing in line like a readymade." Get it? It's sort of like a mess aesthetic, right? Or maybe a cool poetry thing. But it's not only poetry, because it comes with tunes and other assorted noises bursting out of the bulky bag of tricks belonging to the world's most famous tiny Viking, Beck. Beck Hansen that is, grandson of another artistic rummager, the late Al Hansen. Frequently associated with Fluxus and author of the now-classic *A Primer of Happenings and Time/Space Art* (1965), the elder Hansen's influence on Beck seems obvious. Both play with the notions of chance, coincidence, and the seductions of uncertainty. Both believe that mistakes take you where you ought to be. And both are subjects of "BECK AND AL HANSEN: PLAYING WITH MATCHES," an exhibition organized for the Santa Monica Museum of Art by guest curator Wayne Baerwaldt.

Comprising collages, assemblages, text pieces, photos, audio samples, and videos, "Playing with Matches" is situated at that compelling place between the extraneous and the secret, between cynicism and sentiment. But it also works to suggest the total dumbness of the whole "who influenced whom" setup—after all, everything's out there for everybody to muck around in, right? I mean, in a funny, roundabout way, the Hansens have managed to take the collision of influences that most people experience as the full emptiness of life and turn it into art.

Of course, it's no coincidence that such an exhibition appears now. Beck's emergence as a full-fledged pop star adds focus to the unfocused mayhem of sounds and signs that make for global culture—not of the singular "we are the world" variety but a chaotic planetary accumulation of garbage, "masterpieces," winners, losers, two turntables and a microphone. Chewed up by the cool and scary fangs of irony, our cultural remainders become a kind of sonic gruel: grist for the endless recycling and corn-modification of what might be hot or not for the next two seconds. So obviously, what makes Beck an "artist," what allows him to be museumified, is not just his collages on paper, but the fact that he's figured out ways to link the ironic contempt of cultural commentary with the powerful pull of generously tuneful hooks—that he uses sounds and songs to eloquently objectify his experience of the world.

So the lurch from Al's notational obsessions, nonstop collaging, and insistence on an art of portability to Beck's sonic swipes of hip-hop, punk, hardcore, folk, R&B, and everything else can be seen as a canny translation of marginalized "avant-garde" activities into the shiny incessant appropriations of pop culture. Beck's achieving prominence on his own terms would be nothing new within the so-called art world, but in the music business it's a formidable accomplishment that melds his quirky intelligence with the desires and affections of current tastes. (Of course, in a music industry powered by beauty and sexuality, his youth and adorability don't exactly work against him.)

So "Playing with Matches" suggests a lineage that's not only familial but also cross-subcultural. The show asks us to consider how subcultures function as framing devices that offer both comfort and curtailment: from the art world's ability to nurture ambition within its increasingly marginalized terrain to the music industry's promise of profitability and global popularity—at the expense, all too often, of the edgy astonishment that comes with really good art.