

**What Is Man And What Is Guitar?:
Keith Rowe**

Bob Burnett & Alan F Jones (Directors)
Bob Burnett LLC 2021, 24 mins

Roland Barthes wrote of Cy Twombly's paintings, "Here is a paradox: a fact is more purely defined if it is not clean. Take a common object: it is not its new and virgin state which best accounts for its essence; it is rather a state in which it is deformed, a little worn, a little dirtied, a little forlorn: the truth of things is best read in refuse. It is in a smear that we find the truth of redness; it is in a wobbly line that we find the truth of pencil."

At the beginning of Bob Burnett and AF Jones's short documentary *What Is Man And What Is Guitar?*, Keith Rowe reads this quote from a small black notebook. He prefers it as the type of thought likely to inspire one of his performances, but

it is truly a mission statement for his career-long deconstruction of the guitar. From the hollowbody that Rowe began playing flat on the ground in the 1960s to the denuded lapstick that graces the cover of his most recent album *Absence*, he has sought to define the guitar by its deformation, creating smears and wobbles of sound instead of clean notes and chords. In fact, Rowe speaks more like a painter than a guitarist, citing Jackson Pollock, Georges Braque and Robert Rauschenberg to explain how he arrived at his 'prepared' guitar technique.

The resulting guitar sound, admittedly dirty, noisy, even ugly, "became pivotal to the way the other instruments sounded" in the pioneering improvisatory group AMM, according to Rowe. Much of the documentary features his guitar as it relates to Cornelius Cardew's

compositions, Eddie Prévost's drums and John Tilbury's piano, instead of the relationships between the principal players themselves (although we do get one tantalising peek into the often contentious relationship between Rowe and Prévost: "I probably irritated Eddie more than he irritated me," Rowe confesses. "I was probably more strident in making demands"). To dig into the history of AMM would require a different type of film; this one is simply a profile of Rowe in the present day and an inquiry into how he uses the guitar to understand himself.

Sadly, a central aspect of Rowe's life is his experience of Parkinson's disease, and he sees the guitar as a way of understanding that as well. He decided that he can no longer perform solo concerts on guitar because of the tremor in his right hand – the moment he made

this decision can be heard on *Absence*, as he explains in its sleeve notes – but still the instrument informs his practice. We watch as he dims the lights at a concert, playing only a metronome. Rowe and the audience sit in darkness and silence between each click. "The performance becomes a performance of what I cannot do, and a recognition of my own vulnerability," he explains, and in that sense "the guitar is still there".

Has this ultimate abstraction of the guitar revealed anything to Rowe about its essence? His final words in the documentary would suggest not: "I don't know what a guitar is, actually, when it comes right down to it. I haven't got a clue." This is far from an admission of defeat, though; Rowe is smiling in wonder as he says it.

Matthew Blackwell



Stills from Bob Burnett and Alan F Jones's *What Is Man And What Is Guitar?: Keith Rowe* (2021)

Bob Burnett