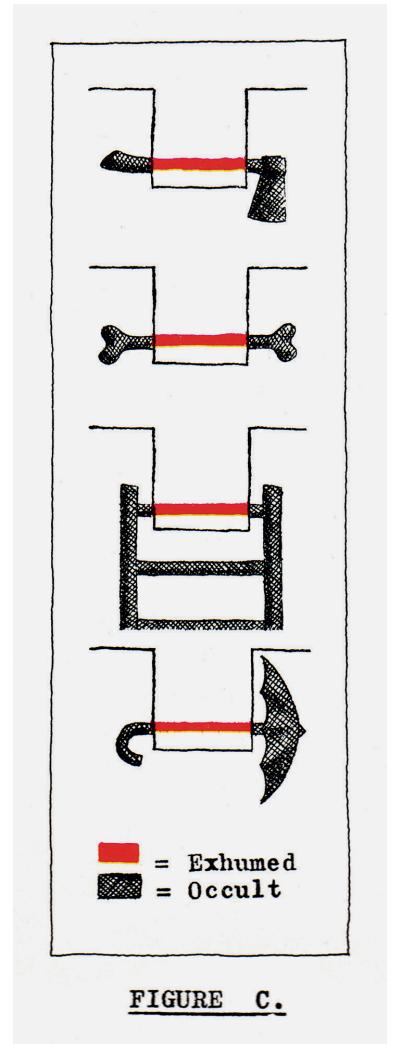




A version of *Kew. Rhone.*'s artwork for its CD-ROM release in 1998 as *Kew. Rom.*



Carla Bley and Mike Mantler's Woodstock studio, Grog Kill, 1976



Peter Blegvad's illustration for the song "Pipeline"

### **Kew. Rhone.**

**Peter Blegvad**

Uniformbooks Pbk 192 pp

*Kew. Rhone.* is a controversial and extraordinary 1977 album by John Greaves and Peter Blegvad. A neglected masterpiece of surreal rock or an exasperating hall of mirrors, a musical *Finnegans Wake*? For many that exasperation starts with those periods in the title, which seem unnecessary even once you've understood that it's an anagram of Knowhere – as Samuel Butler's 1872 novel *Erewhon* was an anagram of Nowhere. Blegvad's lyrics are a torrent of puns, palindromes, anagrams, lists and commentary on pictures. The cover is a grim, grey reproduction of a Victorian painting overlaid with Roman numerals. But the whole is seductive. Greaves's music is rollicking and sexy. Lisa Herman's singing is warm and bright, and both the musicianship and

production are terrific – Greaves had just quit Henry Cow, and was recording with Carla Bley and Mike Mantler at Grog Kill, their studio in rural Woodstock. Drummer Andrew Cyrille asked Greaves to help him learn the intricate rhythms by beating out time on Cyrille's naked back.

The album has been reissued several times, even as a CD-ROM in 1998 (*Kew. Rom.*). Now publisher Colin Sackett has conjured up this delightful book, full of wit, pictures and Blegvad's densely literary considerations, sprouting thickets of footnotes. In the first half former Slapp Happy guitarist, songwriter and cartoonist Blegvad tackles the 11 tracks in order, shedding dada light on his lyrics (in 2011 he was elected president of the London Institute of 'Pataphysics). The book's second half contains 13 essays by members of what US music writer Glen Kenny calls The

Kew. Rhone. Club. So novelist Jonathan Coe contributes an autobiographical memoir, Siegfried Zielinski gets philosophical, and the US singer and poet Franklin Bruno has fun with a counter-historical story, trading places between *Kew. Rhone.* and *Never Mind The Bollocks* (legend has it that Virgin released both albums on the same day, but Coe's keen memory punctures that one). It's a pleasure reading the thoughts of people who have lived with this strange album for several decades. Poet Andrew Joron: "Yet for all the coolth of its construction, there is a warmth that smokes and smolders within *Kew. Rhone.*, a cloud of eros that is not merely captured but actually *produced* by the machine. In this respect, *Kew. Rhone.* is reminiscent of nothing other than Duchamp's *Large Glass.*"

Joron fingers how a story of desire leaks out from the apparently opaque

surfaces of the record. This chimes with Blegvad's realisation that his attempt to write non-expressive lyrics, suppressing his emotions, was causing those emotions to reappear on a deeper level. So the racing palindromes of the title track mask a lament for lost childhood. The list of "Nine Mineral Emblems" constitutes a love letter ("*I am your quarry, your mine*"). In a way the book itself works like this: like a good literary critic, Blegvad is reluctant to get into too much personal stuff, but in reminiscences by Greaves and Herman, that "cloud of eros" is pungent enough. Like a Peter Greenaway production, the record is a closet stuffed with conceits and games. But when Greaves's bass embraces Andrew Cyrille's remarkable drumming, to borrow *Kew. Rhone.*'s manner for a moment, rub conkers awl. Clive Bell

Karen Mantler (Grog Kill); François Ducaut (*Kew. Rom* cover)