

Notes on the Exhibition

Performance

Wolfram Harmuth, alias Chris Jones, as Elvis Presley
A performance of several songs, including “Teddy Bear,”
for the three openings of *Partners*
[Figure 3.44]

German entertainer Wolfram Harmuth has adopted the American-sounding stage identity of Chris Jones for his performances of songs that impersonate the style and sound of the American rock-and-roll singer, Elvis Presley. Harmuth is one of a league of Elvis impersonators around the world that keeps the legendary performer seemingly alive, more than a quarter of a century after his death.

The original performance of the song that mentions a teddy bear is formally commemorated in the exhibit, *Partners (The Teddy Bear Project)*, by a framed gold record of the hit, together with a photograph of Elvis. But apart from the thematic link, the larger purpose of including this performance is to explore the ongoing fantasy of the immortality of this famous person. (He was born on January 8, 1935, and died at his Memphis home, Graceland, on August 16, 1977, from an overdose of a prescription medication, apparently accidentally committing suicide). Many fans perceive him as a Christ-like figure. Devotees make pilgrimages to Graceland, and the denial of his death persists in reputed “Elvis sightings.”

What comes to mind is the car that carried Thích Quảng Đức to his death, and that has one of Browne’s photographs of the monk’s performance of martyrdom mounted on it to this day. The automobile, an old grey Austin sedan, has become a shrine in communist Saigon that keeps alive his memory.

Like the phenomenon of the teddy bear and other twentieth-century icons, Elvis is both a product of promotion and of culture. As a myth, he is part of world memory—perfectly poised as the subject for people’s projections. His powerful legacy has been harnessed, and it continues—beyond national borders and on a global scale—to serve some fundamental human desire to cling to a source of comfort.