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COUM TRANSMISSIONS EXHIBITION, HUMBER STREET GALLERY, HULL, UK, 3 February – 22 March 2017.

Reviewed by Ian Trowell *affiliation*

The work of the multi-media art collective COUM Transmissions was presented at Hull's Humber Street Gallery between 3 February and 22 March 2017 as part of Hull's City of Culture program. COUM are known as the group that evolved into industrial band Throbbing Gristle, with a heavily mythologised event *Prostitution* at the ICA in November 1976 commonly documented as being the point where COUM ceased and Throbbing Gristle commenced. Falling in the same year as early punk controversy and publicity stunts from the likes of the Sex Pistols, *Prostitution* (with a punk audience) added to the confrontation and garnered something of a punk shimmer. Throbbing Gristle would progress through the final years of the 1970s and early 1980s to spearhead an industrial subculture that drew on aggressive art practices, and avant-garde experimental and sci-fi writers. Thus, they have both a punk and post-punk aura that prevails into the current period. This, however, is complex and problematic, and the exhibition provides an opportunity to interrogate and re-evaluate further legacies and lineage, to destabilise certain prevailing discourses.

A double-sided sheet of A4 text outlines the trajectory of COUM, but includes reference to liberating COUM from 'what has, up until now, been predominantly an anecdotal, legendary account'. One can only assume that this refers to Simon Ford's considerable 1999 work *Wreckers of Civilisation* (date) which carefully plots the life of COUM, the fulcrum event of *Prostitution*, and the rapid rise (and sudden curtailment) of Throbbing Gristle. Whilst the book does not come across as such, it might be possible to read the meticulous oeuvre as a kind of process towards Throbbing Gristle such that COUM is simply seen in a teleological manner as being end-driven towards something else much better.

COUM were formed in Hull in 1969 following an event of receiving instructive voices by principal protagonist Genesis P-Orridge whilst driving through Wales. P-Orridge, a student in the city, returned to Hull and gathered a collective of artists and explorers who embodied something of the spirit of the times emerging from 1960s psychedelic culture, activism and ethos. The collective functioned as a loose grouping of philosophically and mathematically inscribed musicians who were drawn towards the banality and nihilism that flourished in early currents of avant-garde art. A musical peak was reached in 1971 with a support slot alongside Hawkwind, after which the collective moved towards performance art practices with an accent on extreme body practices exemplified by movements such as the Vienna Actionists or specific conceptualist artists such as the American Vito Acconci with his disturbing self-installation *Seed Bed* (1972). P-Orridge and Cosey Fanni Tutti moved to London in 1973, and would quickly link up with Peter Christopherson, a photographer and designer with the Hipgnosis organisation. This effectively ends the link to Hull, however Christopherson's relentless and unwavering interest in sexual boundaries and interstices would infuse the group with an extremist modus operandi that would eventually culminate in *Prostitution*. The exhibition covers the period from 1969 and documents the occupied spaces, shifting membership and actions of COUM, pushing through to cover their time in London and acceleration towards *Prostitution*.

The Humber Street Gallery is in the regenerated harbour area, one of several focal points in the City of Culture initiative. Arriving in the midst of an encroaching 'Storm Doris' via delayed and cancelled trains, I was in a somewhat anxious frame of mind – the BBC predictions of the storm course had it passing straight through Hull. The gallery is reached by passing under the monumental installation *Blade* conceived by artist Nayan Kulkarni. This

consists of a single B75 rotor blade repurposed as a Duchampian readymade, at an impressive 75 metres it forged a parallel with Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*.

The COUM exhibition is set out on two floors (the ground floor of the gallery featured a rather ironic exhibition of Sarah Lucas sculptures of provocative casts of female legs each with a cigarette inserted into the rear orifice – the enfant terrible of art now a superstar making a mint out of saucy smut). The first floor of COUM consists of seven filmed interviews with P-Orridge, Cosey and early members of COUM (such as the mathematician Tim Poston). Here the space of the building is drawn into consideration, with a fashionable industrial aesthetic of a stripped-out space blasted with white paint and gunmetal-grey structural aspects. The interviews are replayed on a line of wall-mounted vertical screens, and are shot in super-saturated colour with the interviewed subject interrogated and constrained, looking face to face with the visitor to the gallery and so forging a conversation. Each screen has a headphone point whereby you can engage with the looped film, whilst a muted montage of all seven soundtracks is replayed across the whole space. This fashionable hubbub was augmented by Storm Doris as it began to poke and prise at the external fixtures of the building, and I couldn't help thinking how the quirky old-fashioned nomenclature of this weather event mirrored P-Orridge's recent forays into gender annihilation (pandrogeny) as he transformed him(her)self into a fusty librarian spinster type bedecked in Marks and Spencer twin sets.

The other floor of the exhibition consists of a chronological display of ephemera mounted under 22 vitrines with additional wall-mounted material. These are enhanced by three video installations, the latter of which replays the notorious *Coumdensation Mucus* in which fluids are inserted into, and extracted from, various sexual organs. A number of physical objects are on display such as fetish costumes and a bloodied nail block used in a number of actions. The retention of such a mass of minor details (flyers, correspondence, pseudo business cards, notebooks and photographs) indicates how COUM were part of a wider movement to self-archive, a tactic that had assumed centrality in the conceptualist art movement (with certain conceptualists seeing the practice of creating an archive as being the art event in itself). Passing over the 179 listed items tends towards an endurance test, though the occasional seepage through of the times of the late 1960s and early 1970s via scrawled-on re-used scraps of paper from early computer print-out spools and business documents creates an added and unsettling ambience.

Being a fan of Throbbing Gristle I was naturally drawn to the finale of COUM with *Prostitution*. Whilst I appreciate that the exhibition tried to mitigate against this teleological reading, it glows like a burning star, the bridgehead to Throbbing Gristle and those intense events of juxtaposition, cut-up and horrendous noise thrust into the punk milieu. *Prostitution* features prominently in Sladen and Yedgar's *Panic Attack* book (date) it was the subject of a paper at the recent [Art of Punk](#) conference, and is also featured in John A. Walker's *Cross-Overs* (date) in which he surveys links between art and music. Intriguingly vitrine 14 article 153 – listed as ICA Guest Invitation List, handwritten by Chris Carter - revealed something I had not seen before that questions much of the mythology of *Prostitution* and puts it firmly into a punk lineage. Whilst Walker repeats the neat dissection that *Prostitution* is a move from COUM to Throbbing Gristle (suggesting that by staging the exhibition COUM effectively 'burnt their books' with the world of art), Ford shows how Throbbing Gristle predated *Prostitution* and COUM (briefly) transcended it. However, Ford also emphasises how Throbbing Gristle were critical of punk from the start and talk of the 'glass globe' of the record business – but how much of this is followed through? *Prostitution* was given a punk flavour with the inclusion of the band Chelsea on the night that Throbbing Gristle performed (emerged), and various other references to punk figures ensured a punk assembly in the crowd that added to the frisson of the confrontational art on display.

Comment [MD1]: Can you include more details? Mainly Art of Punk Conference at this place and at that time.

From this it is easy to assume that COUM/Throbbing Gristle were using punk as a kind of dumb extra to reverberate the nihilism of their art. But the guest invitation list penned by Carter emphasises all the music newspapers of the time alongside key music labels (as opposed to Ford who documents that NME's Tony Parsons attended the event – not that he was specifically invited). It appeared that the band wanted to use *Prostitution* to gain a foothold in the punk movement. Ford sets out *Prostitution* in an art lineage of contemporaneous controversy – following on from Carl Andre's *Equivalent VIII* at Tate and Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* at the ICA – such that the emergence of Throbbing Gristle can be rooted to this milieu (and so maintain an ironic and critical distance to punk and the music scene). I don't think it was as straightforward as this, and an alternative reading of *Prostitution* being a proto-punk publicity stunt to align itself to the movement (rather than obliquely resonate with it) remains a strong possibility.

References

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