

Guaranteeing Disappointment:
Time, Culture, and Transgression in the
Context of Throbbing Gristle's Late
Performances.

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I don't think there's any point in doing anything unless you push yourself. When in doubt--be extreme.
-Genesis P-Orridge (Ford, 6.31)

Pretty much EVERYONE who pertains to be 'Industrial' has completely missed the point and take the term 'Industrial' far too literally. For us in the 70s'-80s' it was a way of life, a certain mindset and attitude of non-conformity. We were anti-facists, anti-communist, anti-music industry and anti-government. We still are. Industrial Music as a genre has become a Frankenstein's monster and bears no relationship to what we started in the 1970s'. It has become just another metal bashing sub-genre of goth, punk and rock.
-Chris Carter (<http://www.ikonen-magazin.de/interview/TG.htm>)

One of the things about Gristle I think, is that we're pretty careful to make sure that we're not lured by the kinda star thing. In fact if there's one single mistake that most bands make, it is their fundamental and underneath, their desire to become rock stars, the same as all the other people, no matter how much they might claim that they don't. The Devos and the Pere Ubu's of this world really want to be rock stars and that's not necessarily a bad thing if that is your intent, if you say 'I'm going to be a rock star and I'm going to do it by making groovy catchy records' there's nothing the matter with making groovy catchy records, but if you do it at the same time as you're saying you're doing something that's socially important and meaningful, then that's trades description act as far as I'm concerned.
-Peter "Sleazy" Christopherson
(<http://www.brainwashed.com/tg/interview/dirtpc.htm>)

I think that through COUM we'd learned what not to do with TG. So TG was going to have a direction and an aim. We knew that the music press was essential to a band so we decided to concentrate in that area. With the arts scene we had no intention of playing the game, but it was the reverse with the music scene. We decided to play the game but to our own ends.
-Cosey Fanni Tutti (Ford, 7.13)

Marlow ceased, and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha. Nobody moved for a time. "We have lost the first of the ebb," said the Director suddenly. I raised my head. The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky--seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness.
-Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

Whoever opened the doors to the London Institute of Contemporary Arts on the 19th of October 1976 could not have known the size of the two cultural floodgates they were simultaneously releasing. The exhibition opening that night was a retrospective on the work of the performance art group COUM Transmissions entitled *Prostitution*. On display was documentation of COUM's increasingly transgressive performances and various Fluxus-inspired sculptures consisting of found objects including used tampons. It was mostly the tampons, not the exceedingly disturbing actions documents, that led to a hurricane of press coverage. The exhibition was "the subject of at least 100 newspaper and magazine articles" (Ford, 6.19), several printing a quote by Tory MP Nicholas Fairbairn that "these people are the wreckers of civilization." (Ford, 0.12) The evening was also the inaugural performance by COUM's musical alter ego Throbbing Gristle, the band that manufactured "Industrial Music" as a genre and declared war on the morality of supposed amoral rock 'n' roll. A scandal that saturated the media and the beginning of "the end of music" (Reynolds, 186), all in one night.

This is a study on the performance practice of Throbbing Gristle, or TG: Chris Carter--synthesizers, programming; Peter "Sleazy" Christopherson--samplers; Genesis P-Orridge--bass, violin, vocals; and Cosey Fanni Tutti--cornet, guitars. The philosophies and ideologies of the group have been well documented, particularly those of front-man and self-proclaimed anti-pope Genesis P-Orridge. Their recordings too have developed a body of analysis, Drew Daniel's book on *20 Jazz Funk Greats* being a spellbindingly insightful example. However, analysis of their approach to performance is confined to concert reviews written by journalists at the time. With the release of *The Video Archive of Throbbing Gristle*, which includes footage from 6 gigs between 1978-81, this kind of in depth analysis in retrospect is possible. I have tried to focus my observation on two of their late gigs: February 8 1981 at the London Lyceum Theatre, and May 29 1981 at the Kezar Pavilion in San Francisco. These two performances exude a complex interplay of exhaustion and revelation resulting from the aesthetics of transgression. An approach to

art that constantly seeks any and all limits is one in which ideas are always/already on the road to annihilation: an apocalypticism that demands constant input of the new. In this mode of accelerated inevitable exhaustion, where ideas are unrepeatable, musical genre is melted down to farce: there is no narrative of aesthetic development, but rather an ebb and flow in and out of darkness.

COUM Transgressions

In order to flesh out what I mean by the aesthetics of transgression in the case of TG I will start with COUM. The tagline they put on many of their posters and pamphlets was “COUM Transmissions: We Guarantee Disappointment,” a statement that simultaneously works as both parody and a call to arms. Parody comes in the form of the obvious jab at advertisement in the art-world. By creating promotional materials mock the idea of advertising art the materials become “self aware,” blatantly blurring the lines between art and propaganda, and the whole arrangement gets turned on its head as advertisement becomes art. Less obvious is the proclamation of the project that runs underneath both COUM and TG: all out war on contemporary perceptions. The statement is both a declaration and warning that they are not here to please your senses, and that they won’t give you what you want. In fact, they are going to find out what it is that you want and make sure that is denied to you. But maybe this denial of culturally constructed desires is just what you need.

Many a commentator have drawn comparisons between COUM's work in the early 70's and that of the Vienna Aktionists Otto Muhl, Gunther Brus, and Hermann Nitsch. Like Muhl they practiced a form of communal living that was total immersion in a reality where there was no boundary between art and life. Like Gunther Brus they turned tabooed bodily functions into performance art. Like Nitsch they created modern primitive rituals that were about freeing the mysteries of the body. By the mid-70's COUM actions had become so extremely transgressive that not even the (in)famous performance artist Chris Burden (whose *Shoot* involved him actually being shot) could

stomach them:

Amongst those unable to stand the intensity of the show at the LAICA, according to P-Orridge, was the performance artist Chris Burden and the conceptual artist John Baldessari. Apparently they left after just fifteen minutes saying "it's sickening and disgusting and it's not art." (Ford, 6.32)

What they escaped was *Cease to Exist # 4*, quite possibly COUM at their most extreme.

The performance by P-Orridge and Tutti included enemas, blood, nail swallowing, urine, feathers, vomit, licking up vomit, milk, sexual intercourse, roses, syringes inserted into genitals, and self-mutilation.

Any artist subjecting him or herself to such public displays will, of course, have to answer to the question of the place of shock value in their art. Both Tutti and P-Orridge insisted that it was not about shock, but rather healing.

In actions I initiate tasks of real pain that are overshadowed by theatrical tricks that look MORE real, bloodier. [...] I use real and trick to provoke a question of response. I get NO masochistic pleasure from my risks, but I do get the satisfaction of facing up to my fears and relinquishing inherited, and to me false, taboos and neuroses in a way that offers a system of revelation and education to a percentage of bystanders.

-P-Orridge (Ford, 6.33)

So shock is used to manipulate attention and hence meaning. The audience will become so fixated on the broken taboo that they became unaware of the real physical pain.

Cosey would be pretending to cut herself from her stomach to her vagina and theatrical blood would run out, down her body. That would be completely fake. I would be somewhere else being a lot less physically dramatic, but I would *actually* be swallowing a ten-inch nail and my feet would be on ice cubes and nails that were sticking into my feet more and more as time went on, but people didn't notice that because it was subtle. So I was very interested in the way that perception describes something. People would say, "*I saw this.*" But they *didn't* see *that*, they saw something else much more physically demanding and missed it. That's where I became interested in editing and inherited perception. People are very easily manipulated into believing something that didn't happen and being *convinced* that they saw it [...] I think that's the root of a lot of our culture.

-P-Orridge (Metzger, 147)

It may be surprising to read the above tone which sounds more like that of a sociological researcher than a sick exhibitionist. While P-Orridge is arguably both, the idea of using taboos and preconceptions as tools to perform research on the audience-as-test-subject

will return throughout the output of TG. This makes the COUM actions all the more invasive and confrontational. Not only were you as an audience member disgusted, embarrassed, and inflicted with sickening images that would haunt you for who knows how long, you were reduced to a lab rat good for one purpose only and then disposable.

While COUM actions were research into the manipulation of perception, they were also an exploration of the limits of Self both in the physical and psychological sense. Julie Wilson writes that:

What began with an interest in the restitution and re-interpretation of theatrical and fine art forms moved into full blown exploration into the physical and mental "form" of the individual Self, by exposing the Self to real danger and trauma. In retrospect, P-Orridge suggests that what he was trying to do was to recover information about the Self from the point of real critical action; at the point of real trauma and crisis. [...] P-Orridge began to devise more and more ascetic processes and performance set-ups that would literally afford no safe path for the mind or the body through the performance event.
-(Painful but Fabulous, 68)

Here "critical action" (a term used by COUM) can be seen in a Horkheimerian sense: an action geared towards critique and change as opposed to understanding and explaining. At this point of "real" change information is "recovered." Taboos are one of many cultural constructions that hide parts of the Self, by transgressing them we overcome oppression and at that very point regain a lost part of ourselves. This is not to say that we feel any more whole, perhaps even the opposite. We are not returning to some natural primitive state of pre-industrial utopic bliss, but, rather, transcending our own assumptions about reality. This is the journey of freedom COUM had in mind for themselves and the "percentage of bystanders" willing to go along with them.

Whether looking at their manipulation of perception or their explorations of the limits of Self, COUM were obsessed with information and control. The most direct influence on their approach to this obsession was William S. Burroughs. In 1959 painter and writer Brion Gysin "discovered" the cut/up technique: a collection of procedures to cut up and rearrange text. Gysin and Burroughs had recently begun a life long artistic collaboration, and Burroughs immediately started experimenting with the technique:

I follow the channels opened by the rearrangement of the text. This is the most important function of the cut-up. [...] It's not unconscious at all, it's a very definite operation...the simplest way is to take a page, cut it down the middle and across the middle and rearrange the four sections.
-Burroughs (Odie, 15)

As Burroughs recognized, this all relates directly to the chance procedures John Cage had been carrying out for about a decade (Odie, 19). Both approaches were systems that reorganized material to open new paths within. The purpose was to free the ego from the material and open up perception to a vaster world of possibility.

Through experiments with the cut/up technique Burroughs developed a large theoretical output on information and control. In his *Electronic Revolution* Burroughs explains how power now uses media to control information and, hence, control the masses:

Consider the human body and nervous system as unscrambling devices. [...] the mass media could sensitize millions of people to receive scrambled versions of the same set of data. Remember that when the human nervous system unscrambles a scrambled message this will seem to the subject like his very own ideas which just occurred to him, which indeed they did.
-Burroughs (Ah Pook is Here and Other Texts, 129)

Those in power use a version of the cut/up technique to control the masses. The mass media is impartial yet powerful technology that is used by power to prey on humanities natural inclination to unscramble. The irony is that in order to maintain this brand of control power must make information technologies available to the consuming masses.

This means that the rest of us have access to this same brand of information control:

No, 'They' are not God or super technicians from outer space. Just technicians operating with well-known equipment and using techniques that can be duplicated by anybody else who can buy and operate this equipment." (Ah Pook, 130)

He continues to postulate on a variety of modes of operation for control technologies. In a section that begins "Research project:" he proposes a list of possible experiments including instigating riots with strategically placed portable tape players, causing spontaneous public orgasms, and materializing viruses within the human body with sound

and image, to name a few.

The Electronic Revolution is classic Burroughs: you can never quite tell if he's serious, having fun, or a certifiable manic paranoiac. The beauty is that it's all three. TG, however, took him very seriously. At one point or another they carried out a version of each of these experiments, which took the form of sound montage when Sleazy's sampler sang choruses of police sirens over the band's noise wall, the fascistic iconography and fashion design of the band, their research into sound as a non-lethal weapon, or the radical rearrangement of performer and audience when they played for an audience inside a building through its windows from a cage constructed in the buildings courtyard (a performance that ended with the audience devolving to "acts of violence and frustration"(Ford, 8.13)). And this is not even close to an exhaustive list. What is important to note is that TG extended the cut/up technique by cutting up and rearranging the "text" of rock culture. Their project became less about freedom from an oppressive society, and more about using sound technology to control people. This sort of mass-mind-changing was just not possible within COUM actions. They were becoming increasingly interested in doing something with much more of a populist approach.

Burn it down, start again...

With all of the press following *Prostitution* came recognition and courting from the art world. But this sign of coming success only reinforced the sentiments shared by P-Orridge, Tutti, and Christopherson to move on and focus on TG. To them a future of glossy coffee table collections and art school teaching gigs was a horrible vision, and counter to their entire project. They despised all things glossy and their work did all of the teaching they would ever want to do and more.

[...] there comes a moment where you can see that if you start to do nice, big, blow up photographs, beautifully presented and you wear better clothes and become a little bit more aloof, and more of a dilettante by nature, and you can have a very nice life and teach at an art college and eventually have things in museum collections and one day have a monograph written about you, and just do variations on the same formula that you've developed. In other words, carry on being *Tampon Man*. Though that's not really why I do anything. I do things to find out what happens, I'm not the least interested in art, I'm not the least

interested in music. [...] So I can abandon anything when I can foresee its future.
-Genesis (Metzger, 154)

Here P-Orridge is doing more than authenticating himself as a "true" avant gardist, he is laying out problems and pitfalls of pursuing experimental art. While he claims he is not interested in having a career he is giving advise on how to maintain your career as an experimentalist within systems that push you to stop experimenting once you find something that "works." And what does this sage wisdom boil down to?...quit!

But if COUM is really about critical action, then why are they quitting at the point where they have an opportunity to instigate mass systemic change? After all, they don't *have to* take teaching jobs and they can *still* present their work any way they want. Is this a copout? Had they pushed COUM to such an extreme that there were no ideas left? By Burroughsian logic they had widened their position for manipulating the lines of communication, but, by doing so, had taken a move towards power. Within the system of information control that is the art world they risked becoming part of Burroughs' faceless "They". COUM would be signing away their access to information control in order to focus on art, and for them art was merely a means to an end, the end being information control. And besides, the rock music world was just more fun to manipulate.

So we decided between ourselves that it was time to attack another monolith. We'd attacked the art world, we'd succeeded and in a way the ICA just compounded the success of the commentary. We thought "What are we least trained to be able to do? Be a rock band! None of us play music. Is that a corrupt and formalized cultural medium? Yes. Let's attack that."
-Genesis (ibid)

What TG would soon realize was that the system of information that was rock culture offered them new means for control. By creating Industrial Records themselves they were in complete control of promotion, packaging, and booking, not to mention what they sounded and looked like. Each of these executive functions were also fundamental structural elements of the language of rock presentation. Due to the diversity and abundance of rock performance spaces (in comparison with performance art spaces),

rock promotion had become an intricate system of communication with layers of signification like any language. Hence began TG's mission of total control. As P-Orridge announces on the album *Heathen Earth*: "this is a campaign, it has nothing to do with art...everything you do should be planned out like a military coup."

The extent of this control went so far that they not only established their own record label, but their own genre label. COUM's "we guarantee disappointment" became TG's "industrial music for industrial people." "Industrial" has always been a loaded term. Go into any record store (as long as they're still around) and you'll find racks of recordings devoted to this genre labeled not by a DJ, critic, or promoter, but the musicians themselves. "Industrial music" means something very different today, in the wake of Nine Inch Nails and Marilyn Manson, than it did in 1976 when TG founded it. In order to better understand what they were doing in the current perspective I believe it essential to establish what "industrial" was/n't.

Industrial's not Punk

When you're there and you watch punk rock being formed--literally--as a concept and then the group being formed to represent the concept and the clothes being designed to put the group in and then you see it sold as a life-style and as a philosophy and then analyzed like that you think...punk was a commercial decision.

-Cosey (Daniels, pg. 24-25)

What concerns me is how TG pictured what punk was/n't, and how they used those impressions as objects for self-comparison. In the above quote Cosey is referring to Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren, and John Krivine: Competing promoters, auditioning and forming punk bands in the seventies just as Brian Epstein in the sixties and Lou Pearlman in the nineties. The important difference, as Cosey points out, is the punk promoters weren't just promoting bands they were also promoting their fashion shops, packaged together into a life-style: DIY market creation.

In the wake of the "great rock 'n' roll swindle" these DIY tactics become ethically suspect, or at least ideologically contradictory. Malcolm McLaren's plans are a

fascinating mix of romantic radical postmodern vision and shrewd capitalist opportunism. An ontology of "punk" is simultaneously depressing and affirming for any punk devotee. Depressing in that even the most extreme surface is hiding the same mechanics that motivate all that said extremity is supposed to be saying "fuck you" to. Affirming in that the battle rages on. Discovering the contradictions in your heroes does more than make them human; it reestablishes their original challenge as necessity through its revealed failure. A postmodern dialectic of the cultural extreme.

There are significant differences in material and presentation between the TG approach and that of the traditional DIY. TG did not see themselves as creating markets. It doesn't even seem that their promotion tactics were intended to bring larger audiences to their gigs. The images they used were typically offensive, but always with an ambiguity that left the perceiver with questions not answers. As with COUM, TG's promotional material was more art than advertisement. Is promotion for the sake of itself possible? Again, this subversion goes beyond drawing connections between art and advertising by making explicit statements about the meaning of success. In many ways TG's mistrust of success anticipates the death of punk. It wasn't prophecy, it was the groups relentless questioning of everything. They saw the end of punk not through intuition, but through an analysis of its cultural structure.

As "cultural engineers" they were building something that was free of the mechanisms that punk claimed to be free from. But by always quitting at the first sign of any success they are expressing that there is no cultural origin. If you conceived and implemented an instance of unique culture you must also be always ready to abandon it, for its origins do not make its essence. While, as Burroughs puts it, "The control of the mass media depends on laying down lines of association. When the lines are cut the associational connections are broken." (Electronic Revolution, 126). However, your cultural experiment can, even more easily, be turned into a new line of association. TG's jumping ship at the first signs of success is more than a sort of contradictory radical

snobbery. They must burn what they have raised, move on and start anew. Their mission goes beyond aesthetics to cultural warfare. The only way to keep fighting is to keep the opposition nameless.

If all of this is the case, then what is their promotion doing? If they planned to abandon the project as soon as it became "successful," then why promote? Isn't that self-destruction? It depends on how one defines the function of "promotion." The industry of rock band promotion had created an artistic genre with its own visual rhetoric. TG's promotional materials always seem to call more attention to the economy of band promotion than they do to the band itself. Take for instance their 1977 promotional postcard *Can You Fix Us Up With a Gig?*

One of the recipients of the postcard was Ron Woods, a promoter with several venues that featured punk bands. Woods' son happened to find the postcard leading Woods to vow to never allow TG to perform at any of his venues. (Ford, 7.4) Was it the image, or was it what the image had to say about daddy that Woods found so offensive? TG had an opportunity to respond in *Sounds* (August 20, 1977): "Gen and the Gristles say it's nice to know that punko outrage venues can't stand their postcards, never mind the band." (ibid) The response reinforces their stance on 1970s British punk culture (note the not so subtle reference to McLaren's band). They are flauntingly claiming that "we can out punk the punks," but that also means "nothing is as it seems." They find an opportunity to expose the mechanics underneath a movement founded on an ideology of spontaneity.

Industrial is...

The spectacle is the existing order's uninterrupted discourse about itself, its laudatory monologue. It is the self-portrait of power in the epoch of its totalitarian management of the conditions of existence. The fetishistic, purely objective appearance of spectacular relations conceals the fact that they are relations among men and classes: a second nature with its fatal laws seems to dominate our environment. But the spectacle is not the necessary product of technical development seen as *natural* development. The society of the spectacle is on the contrary the form which chooses its own technical content.

- Guy Debord (*Society of the Spectacle*, 24)

With the above Debord quote we find a path back to the idea of critical action. Like taboos, the spectacle is hiding something. While the taboo hides the place where something personal was lost and always/already forgotten, the spectacle conceals the unpleasant truth of modern social relations. There are certainly parallels between COUM's push towards Self recovery and TG's push towards a more social version. The significant difference being that the experience of COUM was to witness from the outside an other physically and psychologically transgress to recover a bit of primitive being, while at a TG gig you were implicated in the transgression from the moment you walked in the door. TG was not about recovery of/for the Self, it was recovery of/for the Ritual.

The clichéd themes of industrial music are alienation and automation. These themes are present from TG through Marilyn Manson but they mean something very different in the context of late 70's UK punk culture than they did in the context of late 90's American suburban culture. The assumption is typically that Industrial Music presents alienation and automation of people as a result of industrialization/mechanization of people by technology. But TG, echoing Debord, do not present technology as an alienating force. It can be, but it can also be a tool used to free. Throughout the existence of TG much of their research went into the development of new electronic technologies. Sleazy developed a keyboard sampler with ten walkman cassette decks two years before Fairlight released the first polyphonic digital keyboard sampler. Carter was developing analog circuits to do a variety of experimental distortion effects called *Gristleizers*. These homemade uncommodified technologies were a reversing of alienation, a synthesis with technology. Marx warned of an arriving "specter," and now it *is* here, has become *a priori*. This is not Mario Savio's man-machine relationship but rather, as Burroughs would put it, men *are* a machine. Technology is an indifferent mediator, it is the spectacle of the rock show is the alienator--an anti-ritual.

The early TG gigs, roughly 1977-78, were direct attempts at breaking down the

rock spectacle. Not only did TG not "know" how to play their instruments, they flaunted it. During a February 1977 gig P-Orridge responded to jeering audience members by pushing them onstage and handing them his instruments. (Ford, 7.9) But TG would not just implicate the audience in improvised ways, as Tutti explains: "[TG] adopted various tactics and audio experiments to stimulate and involve the audience with their work. These included the use of high power Halogen lamps directed toward the audience, strobe lights, industrial strength Negative Ion Generator, (which would often discharge itself creating a spectacular arch of electricity), and a six foot wall of mirrors at the rear of the stage." (Ford, 8.10) The inversion here is obvious, but there's more going on than just putting the audience in the spotlight. The band was being stripped of its packaging and posturing: the blinding halogens strived to de-commodify. It is a gesture of alienation, but not in the sense that it is alienating--revelation not manipulation.

As mentioned above, these early gigs could additionally be read as a series of experiments on sound as a agent to effect physical and psychological change (and control and manipulation). They termed it "Metabolic Music," as P-Orridge explains: "People forget--they think that music is just for the ears, they forget that it goes into every surface of the body, the pores, the cells, it affects the blood vessels." (Ford, 8.10) They were reading military research on sound as a non-lethal weapon, and doing experiments on themselves with their PA at full volume:

All our clothes were moving, vibrating back and forth. I could see criss-cross patterns in the air. And as I moved, I could hear them going CLICK, CLICK, the joints in the criss-cross pattern. Chris got tunnel vision and then we both started to lose our sense of balance and fall over. Everything in the room was moving all over the place.
-P-Orridge (Ford, 8.10)

This again harkens back to the search for physical limits of the body of COUM, but there are some significant differences. COUM was about seeking limits and boundaries through action, here the boundaries are revealed through immersion. The feeling of sound at high volumes tickling every inch of your skin is a truly sublime experience in which

you are momentarily awakened to the vastness of your own body. You also become aware of a quantum-like connection between yourself and your surroundings when you realize that everything shaking in the room is sharing a vibration with you oscillating on the same wavelength. Everything seems to dematerialize making the performance more of a singular moment in time than a touring product.

These approaches to performance attempted to break down the rock spectacle and recover ritual, but, as Debord argues, spectacle has a way of reinserting itself into everything. If the audience came expecting something and got it then spectacle would have won, and TG went to great lengths to not repeat themselves. The difficulty being that as they extinguished idea after idea they were developing more and more of a following. In other words, with each used up deconstruction of the rock band they came closer to being a rock band--closer to the end of the river.

The ultimate poseur, I thought, is someone who dances to Throbbing Gristle. And Throbbing Gristle went on and on...Just like a rock group.
-Paul Morley in the 11-8-1978 issue of *NME* (Ford, 8.23)

The Late Gigs...

On the eighth of February 1981 TG took part in what was seen by many to be the first major show of the Industrial Movement. (Ford, 11.6) The stage at the London Lyceum brought together performances by the emerging "all-stars" of the British Industrial scene: Non, Z'ev, Clock DVA, Cabaret Voltaire, and, of course, TG. That these musicians could pack such a large venue was another sign that "Industrial" had become much more than what it was in 1976; and dangerously close to becoming MacLarenesque.

Of the visually documented TG gigs, the Lyceum performance is in many ways both the most savvy and the most spellbinding. It is certainly Chris Carter's most impressive synchronization of lighting and music. The elaborate lighting system of the theater pulses along with the music developing a full palette of techniques. At times the lights separate the band into duos by taking discrete steps through lighting schemes that

leave some members lit and others in the dark. Not only does this effect convey a sense of separation between audience and band, but also a sense of dissection within the band itself. It highlights that what you are hearing and seeing is not really a band. Carter's lighting also articulates a structure that spans over the entire set, giving the set continuity and breaking down the trope of the rock song.

The lighting is overall much more atmospheric than any of their other gigs. For the most part the band is emerging and then disappearing into the dark. The opaqueness of the stage brings a wholeness and continuity to the set. The observer plays less attention to P-Orridge's instrument switching. It also seems to authenticate P-Orridge's newly shamanistic performance. With the spotlight on him his ecstatic preaching comes off as to close rock-star posturing. However, when his chants come from darkness, and his body writhes in and out of the spots it is as if he really has gone into a trance state straddling two different dimensions.

The structure of the set is a drastic departure from that of typical punk and industrial groups (including TG). They fill the 56 minutes with only three songs that mold in and out of each other creating a surprisingly psychedelic distortion of time. Perhaps this approach to set structure could be read as the beginning of the end for Throbbing Gristle and the beginning of Psychic TV. What is certain is that the band seems tighter and more professional than before (or ever), and that this proficiency could only mean that the mission was soon to be over.

The set opens with a chorus of church organ samples: something resembling a harmonic progression but, in the end, is an oscillating texture. Several minutes in P-Orridge's voice enters through the typical slow delay (ca. 60 bpm) with a long decay time. The low end starts to throb and shiver. Suddenly, almost shockingly, single notes from the organ texture start glissing downward. You get the sense that your assumptions are not safe, and as the texture continues to be dissected a new space opens up. Sleazy's vocal moaning enters mirroring the organ glissandi. Is the body safe from this dissection?

In the darkness P-Orridge has picked up a large amplified roto-tom that lets out a low thud every four beats at ca 120 bpm. Since when did TG use live drums? P-Orridge, using the long delay on his voice, builds a mass of indecipherable words. As his tom hits switch to eighth notes, the vocal mass shifts and morphs into a tribal chant. But this chant does not feel referential to some ethnomusicological recording; it seems to come from a culture of an urban primitive consciously using technology to ritualize himself through himself by multiplying his own voice.

As the last of the chanting fades, at about 13 minutes into the set, an electronic kick drum emerges underneath. Carter's synthesizers create a two chord loop over a rumbling bass noise. P-Orridge starts preaching in a reserved tone, the thick delay on his voice still making him indecipherable. The synthesizers build melodically to a wall of what sounds like a chorus of shrieking Persian women. Again, the electronic character of the sound makes it easily appropriated to reinforce a sense of primitive urban ritual rather than reference another culture. The volume slowly comes down and we return to the simple bass drum pattern. It is here where we first become aware that the lights are synchronized with the music, as they shift from figuration to figuration with every bass drum hit. Some lighting figurations make the whole band visible, others just two members. The regular repetition of this visual dissection works to slowly wipe away any spectacle-spectator relationship. You stop caring about what they are doing after a while and find yourself floating atop discrete perceptual shifts. TG is most effective in these moments when you think, "this is not a band." And if they are not a band, then what are they? And what are you doing?

At about 27:30 into the set the recognizable drum machine pattern for *Discipline* kicks in. As the pattern loops TG assemble into a groove. This is incredibly jarring. You realize you have been listening to about 29 minutes of music, and this is the first time the band is perceivably synching up with each other rhythmically. The audience is unaware of the line of about ten spotlights behind the band pointing straight at them until this

moment, when the groove locks in for the first time, when they are unleashed, leaving the audience shocked by the realization that something so large could be so easily hidden. The lights burst with each bass drum hit, heightening the synergetic effects. Was the opening half hour of amorphous textures, ambiguity, and boredom all psychological preparation for this moment when suddenly the blurry world comes into focus?

P-Orridge is now screaming repeated phrases through the vocal delay. He sounds desperate. The delays of his voice are sent into swirling glissandi. The roto-tom returns for the first time since the opening song, and the band builds to a noise wall, plateauing for a little over a minute at 36:45. The volume comes down over the course over three minutes and the texture thins to reveal floating layers of contrapuntal synth choir patches. The thinning continues until about 42 minutes in when they have stripped everything down to the *Discipline* drum loop. But this is no cadence, it is a trough, and as the wave starts to build again material from the first song returns this, time it's the church organ samples. The wave crests again reaching its peak in a noise wall of looped chanting and dense layering of synthesizer arpeggiations that begins at about 47 minutes. This plateau lasts until 50:40, nearly three times as long as the previous one. Again, the texture thins and the volume subsides. At this trough, however, the drum loop suddenly stops at 52:17 leaving a quiet ghostly texture of organs and slowly wandering slide guitar over a two note bass line. This continues until the mass has completely exhausted itself at around 55 minutes. A nearly 30 minute long version of *Discipline*!

The structure of the Lyceum set, articulated both aurally and visually, is what makes it such a successful work. By exploding formal tropes of the rock song and erasing the rock performer icon, TG was able to create an atmosphere that went beyond. The audience was not experiencing a mock ritual dramatized by a rock band, but they weren't part of a tribal ceremony either. At the beginning of *Discipline* P-Orridge responds to the hesitant applause with "It's nice to know everybody's a little bit uncertain. What we need now, I think, now that you've all relaxed a bit, digested the hamburgers, what we need in

here, in this rather large place, what we ought to have and we're going to get now, what we want to have, what we need is a little bit of discipline, [shouting] *I mean you can't sit there and sleep all night, you've got to wake up sometime*. Are you ready boys? Are you ready girls? We want some discipline in here. WE WANT SOME DISCIPLINE IN HERE!" But one has to wonder whether the hesitant applause is a result of the audience being disengaged or if it's the opposite. The Lyceum show is an exhausting and disorienting experience that seems to want to be more religious ritual than rock concert. This makes P-Orridge's confrontational stage persona (one punk rock trope that has survived) seem out of place and distracting. Since when did TG need applause anyway?

In a radio interview shortly after the Lyceum gig P-Orridge explained what he saw as the future of the band: *psychic music*. "I think it's the only way we can go now. I think that the technology has been explored and the roots of blues music and slave music has [sic] been explored, and now we've done the Industrial music. We have to go beyond into where man meets space. I don't mean cosmic like Tangerine Dream, I mean inside of the head." (Ford, 11.6) Whether he knew it then or not P-Orridge was describing the future directions of the not yet formed Psychic TV, not the soon to disband Throbbing Gristle.

There is always a pile of rotting reasons for any band to break up, and they range from the personal to the aesthetic. What is of interest here is how aesthetic changes and/or aesthetic dreaming might be seen as an expression of shared apocalyptic intuitions within the band. After the success of the Lyceum gig and the re-genrefying of *20 Jazz Funk Greats* TG was in serious risk of becoming popular. In addition, the shamanistic pseudo-religious ideas that P-Orridge was developing could easily become dogmatic. What better way to make the uninitiated feel at home than through performance practices taken from religion? TG were always trying to be populist, but not popular.

Gavin Martin reviewed the Lyceum gig for February 14 issue of the NME, writing, "Gristle are a murky mist in my memory. Sanity [sic] towels preserved in jars.

Auschwitz. A record that sounded like a dentist drill. A funny name.... They wire things up as they go, they stuff the audience with their wares and it is wearing stuff. They can't keep their attention in one place for long enough. When they produce one of their infrequent splays of exciting sound it seems to be a mistake; most of the time they are disengagingly trite. Their new single 'Discipline' sees people scurrying to the bar with its shunted staccato'd operatic vocals. 'Discipline' is the industrial, electro-robotic 'Respect'." (Ford, 11.8) Martin seems to be chronicling an eventuality of exhaustion. To him, both the process and material had turned the band into what they despise: predictable. Like punk they have created an extreme and volatile surface that is merely hiding the structure of pop.

But Martin also seems nostalgic for the old Throbbing Gristle, or at least the idea of it. Is this the murky memory he is referring to the nascent and ideal incarnation of the band propagated by the myths of the early TG shows where alienation was heightened to an extreme, where the band was confrontational without saying anything? This is one of the dangerous paradoxes of making music, or any performed art, in the extreme: you are always/already less than your reputation. Horror is often more powerful when left to the imagination to linger and extend in time. The reality of the horrific consumes time. The state of shock pauses cognition, making it perceived as a brief moment followed by the long stretch of recovery. Every person for whom you perform is anticipating the pleasure of release from/through the lingering images that the mythology that surrounds you has spawned within their consciousness.

This brings us back to Burroughs' idea of mind control. By rearranging the lines of communication you are creating a desire for release, a desire that can only be fulfilled by your product. At first this seems to be a limit. Eventually you will run out of ways to keep your audience unfulfilled. All of the promotion, propaganda, and fashion that TG surrounded themselves with seems geared towards creating expectations that they could break.

Three months after the Lyceum gig TG was off to California for their first and only American tour. In between their Los Angeles and San Francisco performances they continued to set up and break expectations. During a radio interview P-Orridge announced (unbeknownst to the rest of the band) that they would break up after the San Francisco gig. He explains that after the LA show Don Preston of the Mothers of Invention approached him with compliments. “It was a nice moment for me personally that someone who played on one of the first albums I’d bought [...] came up to me and said ‘We really like your record.’ It was a nice moment but also quite odd and disorienting. ‘Wow, it must mean we’re a real band. Time to stop!’ That was when I realized we should break up in San Francisco, just like the Beatles and the Sex Pistols. It was a sense of history.” (Ford, 11.10) For the TG scholar this logic does not defy expectation, but for the admirers that made up the infantile San Francisco Industrial scene (Research was published in San Fran) it was a broken promise. At the moment that Industrial announced itself as an international cultural phenomenon the band that created it broke up. “A sense of history” means more than a narrative line of British rock bands, it’s a destroying of history before it happens. There will be no Gristlemania. Return your fascist camouflage couture outfits (after the San Francisco gig, of course).

This creates interesting circumstances for a performance. On May 29 TG performed their apocalyptic gig at the Kezar Pavilion to about 1,000 people. Everyone in attendance saw more than a show, they saw the funeral of a (mock-)legendary band.

Structurally speaking, the Kezar set is much more conventional than the Lyceum set. While Lyceum spread 3 songs over the course of an hour, Kezar uses 11 to fill the same length. The beginnings and endings of songs are much more clearly articulated. Together with the elaborate synergetic lighting of Lyceum being replaced by house lights in Kezar, TG come across as more band than primitive cult. In many ways TG seems to be giving the audience what they want more than ever before. At first this may seem contradictory, but this also heightens the pain of the broken promise. It would only be

possible for TG to give their audience what it wanted in the context of it never happening again. This reflects the false promises involved in belonging to anything.

The set opens with P-Orridge “summoning the spirit” of a dog he saw die in San Francisco. It is exactly as uncomfortably naïve as it sounds. He describes the dog’s death and announces that he will summon its spirit. What it is underneath is a classical rock set opener. He tells a story that is specific to the city through which he is touring which helps to authenticate the experience as different from a record. The story also allows him to refer to the audience directly when he says “the I saw all of you.” The audience becomes subjects within the music. The song is an inviting introduction, politely asking, “get comfortable, you’re at a rock show.”

At 5:40 a drum machine beat enters. P-Orridge walks away from the mic puts his back to the audience, and adds a bass line. For a while each band member has their back to the audience and each other. They seem totally alienated. Each of their focus square on the knobs in front of them to such an extent that you wonder if they are actually listening to each other. This is the alienation and automation promised, and the moments of the set that do feel truly unique.

At 12:50 Sleazy’s sampler is highlighted against a floating distorted bass melody. It feels like Burroughs and Gysin in action. You know that you’re hearing found sounds, but you’re not quite sure where they came from. In the act of attempting to trace the sounds to their origin new lines of association are opened up, and the listener becomes vulnerable. The diversity of samples decreases until we are left with the throbbing of helicopter blades accompanied by an industrial version of ABBA as Carter's synthesizer plays steady sixteenth notes through oscillating resonant filters. This symphony of throbbing and pumping becomes a ground over which Tutti’s fuzzed out slide guitar freely wanders. Every sound has its own space and they speak clearly. The exciting splays of sound are solicitously calculated.

There is more beautiful calculation that follows. At about 24:20 a new drum

machine loop kicks in. P-Orridge starts to play a bass line, but slowly becomes out of sync rhythmically. Instead of continuing the trajectory and becoming progressively out of phase or committing to the groove and getting back in sync he just stops. He returns to the mic and builds vocal utterances to a dynamic peak at 24:30, at which point the band does a tight textural shift. A gesture that starts as an inefficient looseness continues gracefully into a rehearsed tightness. Unlike previous performances where it was clear that though TG postured as a band they were in fact not one, in the Kezar gig there are moments where they are a well-rehearsed sing-along machine. And yet these moments are still surrounded by reminders that the band is really a group of performance artists who don't know how to play their instruments. P-Orridge reminds us explicitly of this during his improvised monologue in the song *Persuasion* at 37:40 he explains "I could sing for you like Frank Sinatra, but I can't sing you see." How does one sing along with a singer who can't sing?

TG go to the tried and true closer *Discipline* to finish the set. This version, lasting a little over 11 minutes (44:05 to 55:45), is tighter and more anthemic than the Lyceum version: there are no crests and troughs, just non-stop in your face Gristle. P-Orridge begins to take on the tranced-out shaman character, but leaves it for the punk front man. He gets in the face of the front row of the audience and has them scream into the microphone. At one point he briefly makes-out with what appears to be a skinhead hopped up on amphetamines. Here, at the very end of the line, is where TG give the audience exactly what they want. It seems that Gavin Martin may have been right that "'Discipline' is the industrial, electro-robotic 'Respect'." (Ford, 11.8) And yet during the non/alienating rock 'n' roll trope of the sing-along-when-the-mic-gets-pushed-in-your-face, when spectacle seems to have gotten the better of TG, a beautiful and chaotic backdrop of synthesizer noise and samples has collected. The dense tumbling texture prophesies Skinny Puppy's industrial layerings that would come half a decade later. The two gestures of killing Throbbing Gristle and leaving behind a promise of futures to come

are happening simultaneously.

End of the Line

Near the end of the Kezar set the texture thins and lets a sampled voice clearly speak through: "You understand that this mission does not exist, nor will it ever exist." Instructions that Colonel Lucas gave to Willard the assassin, in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, cut out and reassembled for an apocalyptic set. TG, like Willard and COUM, were doomed from the beginning. With a mission declared alternately as "annihilating reality" and "all out war on contemporary perceptions," there is no arrival. Start over--nameless mission replaces nameless mission. The rock-genre-as-social-movement conflation is high spectacle. Industrial was set up to fail like punk before it, only maybe consciously. As musical genres continue to fragment and proliferate we may feel less socially empowered collectively, but we forget that these musical movements of an earlier era were seeking the same "thing": fulfilling an always/already broken promise. This desire is the root of all music.

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