



COUM Transmissions  
*After Cease To Exist*

October 30 — November 30, 2024

*Judy's Death is thrilled to announce its third exhibition, 'After Cease To Exist', centered around the eponymous 1977's short film by COUM Transmissions.*

Produced with Throbbing Gristle, *After Cease To Exist* acts as the apotheosis of the first stage of their career, as they began to cast off the shackles of their previous incarnation as COUM Transmissions, a freewheeling, Tory-MP-upsetting, performance-art collective styled as the Wreckers of Civilisation, and forged ahead with their development as musicians. Like all things Gristle, nothing was straightforward. As their later work would go on to demonstrate, Throbbing Gristle was beholden to no one idea, and albums such as *DOA: The Third And Final Report Of Throbbing Gristle* (Industrial Records, 1978) and their opus *20 Jazz Funk Greats* (Industrial Records, 1979) were equally content with minimalist tales with glittering synth tracks that sound like ascending a staircase of jewels. To this end, *After Cease To Exist* is an almost archetypical example of how un-archetypical the group often was.

Bookended by several minutes of black screen scored with a harsh ambient hum (which would later go on to be released as the entire second side of *The Second Annual Report* (Industrial Records, 1977)), the film acts as a demo, art piece, and concert film in only a few minutes of audiovisual assault. Footage of concertgoers walking out, scenes of the band playing in an empty room, and desolate soundcheck, are all intermingled with the real 'meat' of the film, footage of band member Chris Carter being tied to a table and castrated by his future wife Cosey Fanni Tutti.

It is probably entirely incidental that these scenes of the film resemble the now-notorious torture porn genre, yet unavoidable. But where that genre exists entirely within the spaces between the buildup, the infliction, and the aftermath of the pain, this film defies any attempt to try and reason with what is on screen. If the impact is meant to be one of horror, then the absence of any dialogue track goes a long way to neutering (for lack of a better word) the squeamishness of the potential impact. The film renders the viewer mute, and passive; the impact comes not necessarily from what is happening but from the viewer's perspective in relation to it.



There is something matter-of-fact, tossed-off, about what's happening. The camera does not shy away from the close-up, but in recollection, we feel far away from the 'action'. This is in part due to the crummy, cigarette-stained aesthetic of the yellowing VHS tape that the film is currently viewable on (although it was originally shot on 16mm), and also the absence of the diegetic soundtrack. There is no crescendo or buildup; we are not guided into the castration, but instead presented with it as a fact to understand on our own. The result is that the film doesn't seem to think that what's happening is especially notable or impactful, and such a cavalier attitude is much more disturbing than anything we actually see. Coupled with the impressive effects work, a silicon pair of testicles complete with sperm tube, the result is a snuff film that, it feels, could be real; at the very least it defies what we now know of as a fictional representation of snuff, so divorced from the trappings of the genre, and so influential in developing said trappings, that it cannot help but stand alone.

Throbbing Gristle's work, taken as a whole, inspires an uneasy plethora of responses, including disgust (both viscerally and morally), amusement, fear, and uncertainty. They were peddlers par excellence of the seedy, unpleasant, and 'wrong'. Listening to their music feels like taking a bath in grim unfamiliarity, but like all baths, it does bring a modicum of comfort. This is, perhaps, an unusual admission, but it is one I mean with complete sincerity. There is something I find close to soothing about their output, and I believe it is through the way the band paint a picture of the grotty ley lines that underpin British culture and British life. *After Cease To Exist* is one of the key manifestoes that delineates this comfort. Taking place, as it does, in a faceless and nameless derelict room with dirty walls and a brutally minimalist interior design, it nevertheless strikes one as familiar. These are places we have all visited, in some form, either from a purely aesthetic standpoint, or in the sense that we have all wound up in unfamiliar places where it feels like we don't belong; places that invoke a strong reaction of the uncanny, or unheimlich. We can tell ourselves that there is nothing 'dangerous' about them, but they feel dangerous through their heightened banality; the uncertain intersection between their disarmingly unremarkable nature and the undeniable stench of their aura.

This heightened banality articulates a queasy, but very British, liminality. We all, at some point or another, find ourselves passing through rooms like these. They were not built to be stayed in, but they remain unavoidable. Whether it's a public toilet, the backroom of a pub, an empty church hall, someone's basement, an unusually spacious cupboard, a betting shop, an empty cinema, the stockroom of a restaurant, an apartment corridor, the stairway of an office building, an alleyway stacked on both sides with walls of red brick, the grey drizzle of the highstreet; we never stay in these places for very long, but they impart something onto us. Every country has these places, but



Throbbing Gristle, with their dictum of ‘industrial music for industrial people’, latches onto the British form and articulates it beautifully. The places described above are not horrifying, but their liminality and uncertainty of purpose make it easy to link them to horror (easy to shoot an art film in which someone gets castrated, for example). They bristle with the unknown, the uncertain, the darkness of potential. Mark Fisher, writing in *The Weird and Eerie*, posits that the eerie ‘seldom clings to enclosed and inhabited domestic spaces; we find the eerie more readily in landscapes partially emptied of the human’ (Mark Fisher, 2016); in the spaces I describe above, the mental image forms without individuals. When we consider the presence of people, of ourselves, we are only passing through and never actually staying there. *After Cease To Exist* is the exception that proves this rule. Although it contains people, there are no humans. Nobody reacts in the way one would expect to a live castration, and any visible sense of pain is mitigated by the absence of diegetic sound. The un-existence of the people is a valid match for the un-existence of the room it takes place in. As witnesses, we are trapped there for as long as the camera remains there; the camera will not leave, and without the camera, it might be the case that we ourselves cease to exist. Indeed, through a combination of the film and also the manner in which it exists now, in a degraded format, all lines are blurred. We are neither coming nor going, we are simply there, watched but not seen, watching without seeing.

A lot has changed since *After Cease To Exist* was released. The world has undergone the rise of neoliberalism, austerity, deregulation, massive cultural shifts, a renegotiation of the acceptable boundaries of unproblematic art. In this sense, it is a time capsule to a time when the art movements operated on the underside of power, utilizing that dark energy to say something about the state of the world; about Britain. It is not fair, or accurate, to describe COUM/Gristle as an apolitical group. Though their intent was to disrupt, this was usually aimed at those to whom disruption would not go unnoticed; the ruling elite. Their 1976 show, *Prostitution*, drew an amount of ire from politicians (and one Tory in particular, Nicholas Fairbairn) that seems almost anachronistic, in the way the *Video Nasties* and *Mary Whitehouse* now seem anachronistic; relics of their time, reminders of battles that have long since ended, a preach to a choir and amusement to anyone else. The diffusion of collective identity and lionization of individual viewpoints that has taken place since then means that another *After Cease To Exist*, the work of a group with singular aims, is not likely to occur; whatever today’s equivalent is has likely already been filmed, and is lying out there waiting to be discovered by someone else in forty years’ time, its impact not likely to be assessed until the world has changed to leave it intact. But we have the 1977 film with us now, and the light it shines both on Britain, and the changes that have taken place within Britain since then, are invaluable. Although *After Cease To Exist* is ostensibly a work of the industrial music and art movement, wrapped around the form of the horror film, to me, it stands as one of the great punk statements of the last fifty



years. It is impossible to watch it and not consider the misery, griminess, and relentless squalor of the liminal spaces that follow us through life; heightened banality.

The true horror comes from the fact that you might find this banality familiar, or even consolatory.

— Declan Cochrane

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