

Brainwashed - Coum Transmissions Films, Sunday Nov. 6 at Participant Inc.

Written by Paul McRandle

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Coum Transmissions was the performance act Genesis P-Orridge, Cosey Fanni Tutti, and various co-conspirators, ran through the early to mid '70s. Barely advertised, this showing of Coum videos packed the Participant Inc. gallery with viewers uncertain of what they'd come for.

As P-Orridge noted in his opening remarks, they wanted to bring the body into art and use the repetition of mundane tasks to break through to some more intense existence. Like Linda Montano and Chris Burden in the US, they were interested in endurance pieces and it's difficult for a movie, unless it involves eight hours of staring at the Empire State Building, to evoke the tedium and sustaining powers of the performers. In other words, the films weren't magnetizing rather than boring, though P-Orridge seemed to think the audience might not have the patience for them, warning that they weren't a Law and Order episode. No they weren't.

Coumdensaton Mucus from 1975 featured Genesis dressed as a young school lad and an even younger looking Peter Christopherson. P-Orridge described it as an improvised lecture for students at Royal College of Art on the art world theme "You fuck me and I'll give you a show." The soundtrack was by both of them and Genesis described it as in many ways the first Throbbing Gristle recording, drawing from microphones planted around the school recording conversations and sounds. The performances were for the camera, taking place in tight spaces with little movement. For the first half of the film, a deadpan P-Orridge, sitting in a corner legs spread, gradually pulls down his pants, masturbates, gives himself a milk enema, strokes himself with a candle, inserts a tampon to absorb the milk, sucks on the tampon, drinks milk from a bottle then pees in the bottle. After an interval with a page from a gay porn mag next to a medical image of man with a bandaged groin, Peter Christopherson is shown standing behind a desk. He rolls up his sleeve, wincing as he exposes a long wound, which in the grainy video quality isn't quite obviously fake. He sticks a nail in it, then starts to sew it shut after using a pincer to close the wound, by which point the wound clearly isn't real. The movie ends with P-Orridge in his corner. P-Orridge talked afterwards about the questions the film left: was the wound real?; can a fake wound hurt?; was the hurt pleasurable? Evidently, the video was used as proof the Arts Council that Performance Art didn't exist.

Music for Stocking Top and Stare Case (1974) was a different affair, played out before a live audience at the Royal College of Art over a twelve hour period. Genesis, Cosey and a blindfolded man named Tom Reindeerwork wandered about the stage while John Gunni Busck (John Lacey) played an evocative, often beautiful accompaniment on a homemade synthesizer later bought by Chris Carter for TG. Stage center stood a pyramid of four poles beneath which were stencilled arrows, a paper roll, and a "clock" consisting of a stick with curled ends mounted a spindle and given the occasional twirl by P-Orridge. To liven up the screening, P-Orridge read from a document of his thoughts, maybe from the time maybe later, carping at Cosey for not noticing the blindfolded man, wondering why he was thinking of his mother as he masturbated, admiring his clock. On film he was Buster Brown in a schoolgirl outfit and straw boater, kicking his legs on a swing. The cardboard facade of a house stood in for domesticity and the whole thing had a lackadaisical Sunday afternoon feel. There was no theater, no interaction, each performer isolated, like figures in one of Balthus's paintings, cunning children bored at home. Introducing it, P-Orridge mentioned that waking up means having to pretend to be a human again for another 15 hours. "And what am I going to be doing? Stuff."

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The children's costumes, the swing, the generally homey atmosphere create a weirdly nostalgic atmosphere. Like Balthus' painting, you can't be sure you'd want to be in the suffocating rooms with them, but there's a definite allure. P-Orridge remains blankly Keatonish throughout, concentrating on his tasks but aware of the camera. Cosey seems to belong in the environment, sleepy and at ease. What violence the videos include is pretend, fake wounds and blood, and Christopherson looks more like he's stitching a boot than his own arm.

The audience was a little shy about asking questions afterwards, but P-Orridge ended the evening commenting that Coum had done very little recording of their events and he'd thought until recently the two video tapes were lost. Selling beautiful pictures had never been their goal. But was that ever in doubt?