Industrious Records:
Reflections on the Ethics of Georges Bataille and COUM Transmissions

Matthew J L Colquhoun

Course: MA Contemporary Art Theory

University: Goldsmiths, University of London

Module: Curating & Ethics (Jean-Paul Martinot)

Word Count: 8,775

LIST OF FIGURES

All images included in this essay were taken by the author at the exhibition “COUM Transmissions” unless otherwise stated. Many of the materials photographed by the author were exhibited without further citations of their own. Where further citations were listed, they have been included here.

1

> COUM's notoriety hit its height just as the British economy hit an all time low. Was there any connection? Some newspapers thought so. With the economic and social crisis identified at the end of 1973 refusing to go away, commentators kept themselves busy looking for the latest signs of the Nation's declining standards. By the end of 1976 both COUM and the sinking value of the pound would be taken as proof of the near terminal condition of the once Great Britain.[1]

COUM Transmissions were a performance art group formed in Kingston-Upon-Hull in the late 1960s. At once a self-engineered artistic success and failure, the group's reputation ricocheted between rising stars of the art world and hated arbiters of moral panic. Their most notorious work, *Prostitution*, was exhibited at the ICA in London in 1976. Billed as a retrospective of the group's work prior to moving onto new projects, the exhibition became a national scandal after being denounced in various newspapers and magazines, even triggering a parliamentary debate on the acceptable purview of public funding for the arts. During the debate, Nicholas Fairbairn, the Conservative MP for Kinross and West Perthshire, called the group "wreckers of civilisation"—a label that affectionately stuck. Fairbairn has since been posthumously accused of child sex offences.

As discussed by Simon Ford in his history of the group, quoted above, many saw the group's performances as just another symptom of national socio-economic and moral decline, but this is to downplay COUM's cunning approach towards their art practice and its reception, and their thoughtful subversions of the political conventions of British society at the time. The group consistently stayed one step ahead of their audiences, hurling all their hopes and fears back at them with a wicked sense of humour and a grim sincerity. Despite the diverse and spontaneous nature of their performances, the group are best known now for their controversies. COUM founding member Cosey Fanni Tutti addressed this reputation in a 2013 interview with *The Quietus*:

> There were no shock tactics. That would imply a kind of script, a contrivance that would be incompatible with our improvisational approach. Public self-discovery in the form of art actions or music performances can shock. That's just the way it was/is. [...] The fact that

[1] Simon Ford. *Wreckers of Civilisation: The Story of COUM Transmissions and Throbbing Gristle*. (London: Black Dog Publishing, 1999), pg. 6.4

> people called what we did transgressive was at times surprising. We were just doing what we found interesting and putting it out there... communication, but not in its usual format. A more interesting way to instigate dialogue.[2]

The *Prostitution* exhibition in particular revealed the lengths COUM were prepared to go to to put their unusual communication into practice. Through both its title and its content, *Prostitution* explored COUM's consistent entanglements of typically dichotic relationships between people, practices and perspectives—performer and audience; artist and arts council; criminal and academic; outsider and insider; us and them; man and woman; servitude and self-expression; the universal and the particular… Central to the exhibition were photographs of Cosey Fanni Tutti. First published in pornographic magazines, these photographs were recontextualised for the exhibition and presented as "magazine actions".[3] Sex work and modelling were reframed as performance art, subverting the relationship between photographer and model; viewer and subject. The works were censored immediately with outrage over their display accumulating even prior to the exhibition's installation and opening. Other exhibits included maggot-ridden used tampons, syringes and other props that had been used by the group during previous performances, but the photographs of Cosey were the main target of much of the press's ire. In order to skirt around censorship laws, it was decided that the photographs would be exhibited in a separate room only accessible to paying members of the ICA.[4] Press cuttings were presented in their place on the walls of the exhibition, charting the coverage of the exhibition each day as its reception devolved from art world controversy to national moral panic. Cosey writes in her recently published autobiography:

> The explosive media response to the exhibition was totally unexpected but ironically fed well into our show, which was primarily based on how COUM was perceived by others and how our image was at times distorted. What a gift, what a spontaneous collaborative work, forming itself via the media day after day after day. We seized on the new material and me and Chris [Carter] went to the ICA each day to collect the press cuttings, photocopy them and pin them to the wall of the gallery alongside the existing documentation. What had set out to be a retrospective exhibition had been transformed into an evolving show that was increasing in size as the press fed their own hysteria.[5]

---

[2] Eugene Brennan. "Aversion To Repetition: Cosey Fanni Tutti Interviewed". *The Quietus*. Accessed 28 December 2016: http://thequietus.com/articles/13445-cosey-fanni-tutti-interview

[3] This phrasing is borrowed from Andrew Wheatley of Cabinet Gallery, London, when discussing the current presentations of these works in a private conversation with the author of this essay.

[4] To this day, the ICA still charges a one-day "membership fee" on entry to its exhibitions. At the time of the *Prostitution* exhibition, this meant the gallery could operate under the laws of a "private members' club", allowing more freedom with regards to the work it could display.

[5] Cosey Fanni Tutti. *Art Sex Music*. (London: Faber & Faber, 2017), pg. 206

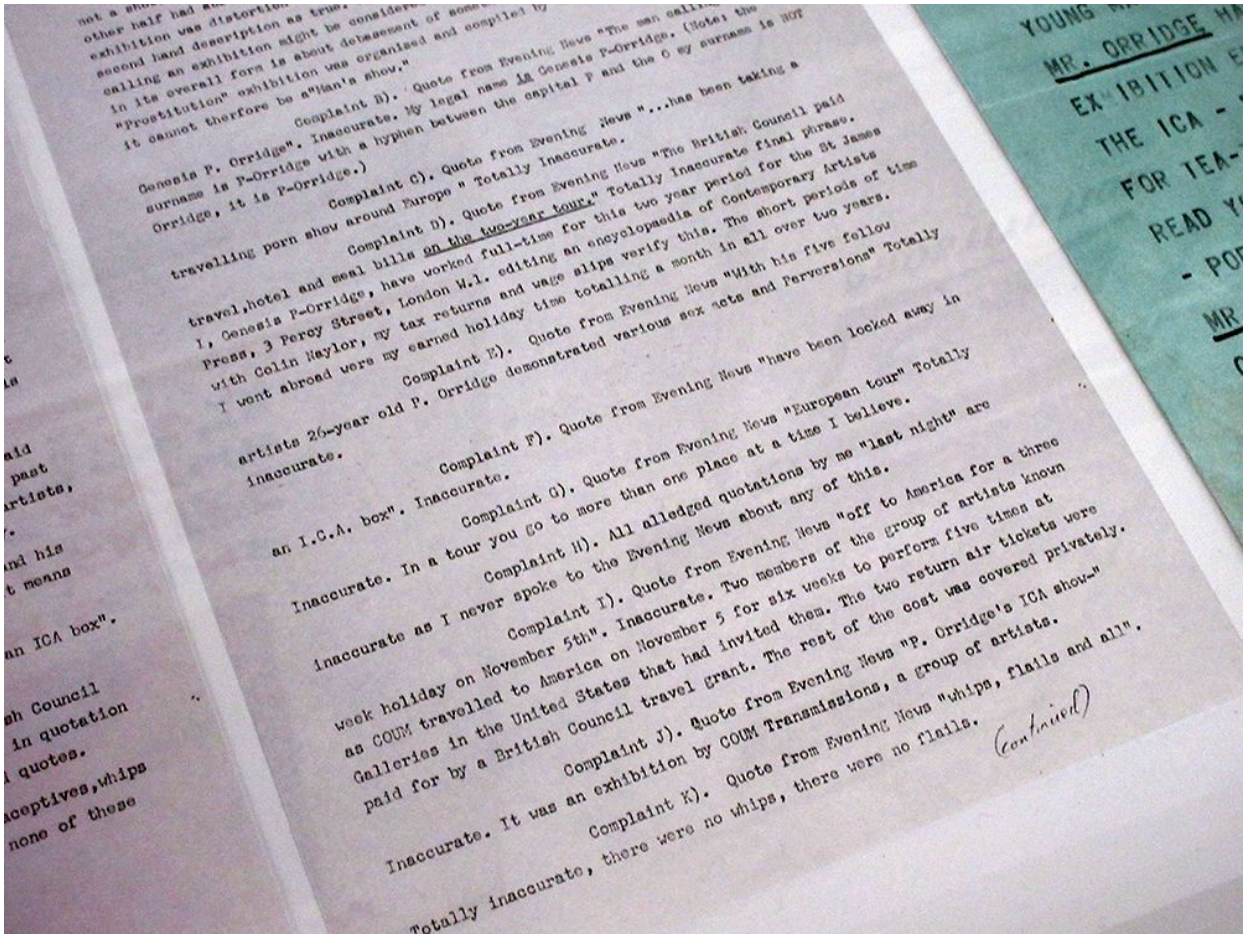

Fig. 1: Press corrections from *Prostitution*, ICA, London, 1976

Alongside the press cuttings, COUM included their own corrections (fig. 1) highlighting the press's tendency to exaggerate, misreport and plainly lie about the group, their intentions and their practices, taking the subversions instigated by Cosey in her photographs and making them once again active by folding them within the exhibition itself. Whilst *Prostitution* is still mythologised for its use of pornographic imagery, in reality the press cuttings and corrections became the exhibition's central materials, as the most active and accessible part of an exhibition that otherwise presented inactive or censored documents of past performances. Despite this, *Prostitution* was shut down after just four days and one performance as the threat of further violence from the press, the public and "obscenity" charges from the Crown Prosecution service loomed over the exhibition

By this time, the group had already decided to swap the art world for the music industry, believing to form a band was a better way of communicating their message. They settled on a definitive four-person lineup and changed their name to Throbbing Gristle. There were no more exhibitions under the name COUM

Transmissions until February 2017 when a second retrospective of the group's work inaugurated the newly-opened Humber Street Gallery in Kingston-Upon-Hull.[6]

Presented as part of Hull's 2017 *City of Culture* programme, the exhibition was curated by Cosey Fanni Tutti and Andrew Wheatley, of Cabinet Gallery, London, with an events programme organised by online music magazine *The Quietus*. Split across two levels, the first floor of the exhibition featured a series of recent video interviews with former members of the group that explored their personal experiences of COUM as a way of life (fig. 2).

Fig. 2: A visitor to the Humber Street Gallery watches an interview with Genesis Breyer P-Orridge

The second floor featured a vast collection of documentation of the group's past activities including photographs, posters, objects, props, and correspondences (fig. 3). It should be noted that these correspondences made up the majority of the exhibition's materials—letters, postcards, mail art; a

[6] "COUM Transmissions". *Humber Street Gallery*, Kingston-Upon-Hull. Curated by Cabinet, London and Cosey Fanni Tutti. 3 February to 22 March 2017.

fragment of a vast archive of communications and transmissions. Exhibited in twenty-two vitrines that filled much of the available floor space, these materials attempted to clarify a project that has suffered from decades of mythologising by both fans and detractors alike.

Fig. 3: A view of the Humber Street Gallery exhibition, showing 4 of its 22 virtines

Prior to the exhibition taking place I had wondered: what is at stake when we exhibit works that engage explicitly with social taboos? Can such works be considered as ethical? What problems arise when curating this kind of work today? Having now seen the exhibition, the answers to these questions seem somewhat irrelevant, but that is not to say the questions in themselves are unimportant. The act of questioning; of communicating ("but not in its usual format") is where COUM reveal themselves most potently. These practices of communication are what make COUM eminently ethical, requiring all those who come into contact with the work to continue its project—in a way that has the potential to place unusual demands on curators in particular. Cosey's own involvement as a curator of her own works in 2017 is a particularly important development, allowing her to regain control over the work's reception (to an extent)—a courtesy that has previously not always been afforded to her.

Misunderstandings of the work have nonetheless remained prevalent. Adrian Searle, art critic for *The Guardian*, was unfortunately unimpressed by the exhibition (and the city of Hull in general) in his review of the *City of Culture* programme's opening festivities. After regurgitating the usual COUM legends and gruesome tales he wrote:

> Whatever they did may well have been anarchic, subversive and even shocking, but the shock has evaporated … What the exhibition lacks is precisely what made COUM interesting – that is to say, what they actually did. Much went unrecorded or was lost. You had to have been there. Sadly, being here now is not enough.[7]

Searle is correct when he says that COUM are no longer shocking. In today's political climate, it's hard to be shocked by anything. "Donald Trump is a member of COUM Transmissions—you know that, don't you?" joked Spydeee Gasmantell during a panel discussion with former members of COUM held over the exhibition's opening weekend.[8] The audience laughed but President Donald Trump is a strangely fitting honorary addition to COUM's lineup—he certainly communicates unusually. Rather than the political normalisation of COUM's artistic practices leading to a dulling of their project, it emphasises its untimely nature and updates the stakes of the work, necessitating a closer reading of the work than ever before.

---

[7] Adrian Searle. "'Wreckers of civilisation': Hull embraces its frenzied sexual past" *The Guardian.* Sunday 5 February 2017: https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/feb/05/hull-city-of-culture-best-visual-art-coum (Accessed 10/03/2017)

[8] "COUM Panel". A discussion and Q&A with Cosey Fanni Tutti, Genesis Breyer P-Orridge, Spydee Gasmantall, Foxtrot Echo and John Lacey, chaired by Luke Turner of *The Quietus.* http://www.hull2017.co.uk/whatson/events/coum-panel/

2

Georges Bataille is likewise an untimely figure, as relevant now as ever before. Like COUM, Bataile was a figure who ricocheted between success and failure; a man who consistently faced up to social taboos in order to transcend the trappings of his present situation. He is also best known for his controversies.

Born in France in 1897, Bataille was a writer of philosophy, literature, sociology, economics and anthropology—to name but a few of his interests. He was a librarian specialising in medieval manuscripts and numismatics, an organiser of public lectures and the founder of infamous academic journal and secret society *Acéphale*, which reportedly disbanded when the group refused Bataille's request to be used as a, or to otherwise engage in the practice of, human sacrifice—the details remain unclear. He is most famous for his works of pornographic literature and writings on eroticism.

Bataille has previously been invoked alongside COUM but not with the close reading he deserves. Commenting on a compendium dedicated to Bataille that featured her poetry, Cosey has said:

> I was interested in [Bataille's] work, but not as a point of reference with regard to my own work. It's just good to know there are others of a similar transgressive mindset and who are so exquisitely creative and evocatively expressive.[9]

He was notably, like COUM (and Cosey in particular), similarly ethically minded.

In his book *On Nietzsche* Bataille writes at length on "communication"—always in inverted commas. In the book's second part—*Summit and Decline*—he writes of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ as the "summit of evil" and notes the necessity of the event's violence in giving Christian holy communion its communicative foundation. Bataille's "communication" is, however, separate from Christian communion. Having at one time considered entering the priesthood, the influence of Christian thought on his writing should not be understated but the crucifixion is nevertheless used here more for its cultural centrality and as a familiar reference point for his more general theory of "communication" in a secular mode. Bataille writes:

---

[9] Eugene Brennan. "Aversion To Repetition: Cosey Fanni Tutti Interviewed". *The Quietus*. Accessed 20/04/2017: http://thequietus.com/articles/13445-cosey-fanni-tutti-interview

> The events [of the crucifixion] took place as if the creatures could only communicate with their Creator through a wound lacerating integrity.[10]

This is also how Bataille believes people communicate with each other even outside the context of Christianity. He continues:

> the "communication" of being is assured by evil. The human being without evil would be folded onto himself, enclosed in his independent sphere. But the absence of "communication"—empty solitude—would be without any doubt a greater evil.
>
> [...] But "communication" cannot take place without wounding or defiling the beings, is itself guilty. The good, in whatever way one envisions it, is the good of beings, but in wanting to attain it, we must ourselves question—in the night, through evil—the very being in relation to which we want it.
>
> A fundamental principle is expressed as follows: "Communication" cannot take place between one full and intact being and another: it wants beings who *question* being in themselves, who place their being at the limit of death, of nothingness. The moral summit is the moment of risk, of the suspension of the being beyond itself, at the limit of nothingness.[11]

For Bataille, communication is a necessary evil, refounding the thought of other more explicit ethicists. Emmanuel Levinas, for instance, writes that the fundamental ethical act is seeing the face of the other as a command not to kill.[12] Bataille attempts to remove any religious, commanding orientation from this thought and adds to this formulation a rupturing of the self. Levinas' face-to-face encounter and the beginning of dialogue becomes, through Bataille, a double-bind; a recognising of the vulnerability of the other and a making-vulnerable of the self. To communicate, then, is to both risk and threaten annihilation—perhaps even a libidinal desire for both. COUM echo this thought through a praxis of putting themselves at risk in order to provoke others into thinking, conversing and acting differently; in order to escape the social expectations that normalise a life of capitalist servitude.

---

[10] Georges Bataille. *On Nietzsche*, trans. Stuart Kendall. (New York: SUNY Press), pg. 32
[11] *Ibid.*, pg. 33
[12] Cf. Emmanuel Levinas. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. 2 ed. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979); Emmanuel Levinas. *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985). Levinas was first introduced by Jean-Paul Martinot as the foundational reference for the *Curating & Ethics* course at Goldsmiths, University of London (2016-2017), for which this essay has been written.

The following statement, written by Cosey Fanni Tutti for the Sydney Biennial and featured in the Humber Street exhibition, contains echoes of the above passage from *On Nietzsche*:

> It is wrong to seek oneself in isolation when the world is proportionately city built, each full of people. One must live in the environment of the day and make that environment as free as possible, to as many people as possible. This is COUM. To give to people what they already have, but that which has been buried by years of varying human ideals and standards. All COUM asks is that people once more work with themselves, their feelings and in doing so, become aware of others.[13]

COUM's ruptures, here at least, sound pleasant relative to Bataille's but they are ruptures nonetheless. The provocations through which these ruptures of self take place are pervasive for both, present in their public actions and everyday uses of language. This is expressed immediately through the name "COUM"—a play on words with no fixed pronunciation. Whilst most choose to say "*coom*" rather than "*cum*", to read the word nevertheless forces an awareness of social expectations. Regardless of the choice made, COUM is always already "cum"—the latin word for "with" as well as the modern word for ejaculation. It is a word containing all the linguistic foldings of Bataille's philosophies of eroticism and community.[14]

The complicity of language in the works of both makes the implications of their actions always immediate. To infect language as the very basis of human communication is to have implications that go all the way to the root of experience and existence, both interior and exterior. Bataille's book *Inner Experience* deals with the former explicitly. He explores the "banal felicity" of authentic inner experience as being "obviously distinct from projects, from discourse."[15] This is not to discount "communication"—again, in inverted commas. Bataille refers to the importunity and servility of discourse and discusses "communication" instead as a way of being. This formulation makes it impossible to write about Bataille and COUM in a bubble: to read either as a purely academic exercise; to enter into "discourse" with them alone is to miss the point. Each project asks to be—sincerely—*lived*.

Jean-Paul Sartre, in his scathing review of *Inner Experience*, criticised the mysticism of Bataille's thought in this way.[16] He believed that for Bataille to root his thought in unavowable experience was nothing more

---

[13] Cosey Fanni Tutti. *For Sydney Biennial Catalogue—STATEMENT by COSEY FANNI TUTTI for COUM TRANSMISSION.* Exhibited at "COUM Transmissions". *Humber Street Gallery*, Kingston-Upon-Hull. Curated by Cosey Fanni Tutti and Cabinet Gallery, London. Letter dated September 1978.
[14] More on this later.
[15] Georges Bataille. *Inner Experience*, trans. Stuart Kendall. (New York: SUNY Press, 2014), pg. 113
[16] Quoted at length in "Response to Jean-Paul Sartre (Defense of *Inner Experience*)" in Georges Bataile. *On Nietzsche*, trans. Stuart Kendall. (New York: SUNY Press), pgs. 173-180

than a lazy convenience. He went on to point to, deconstruct and ridicule the paradox of making something as tangible and definitive as a book about something so ephemeral and elusive. Bataille, in his response to Sartre, highlights the very continuation of the paradox that Sartre instigates through this communication of his own feelings. Sartre's review, which Bataille says "moved" him, permits Bataille "to begin again" the anguish from which his book originally emerged.[17]

On the paradox of the book Bataille writes:

> The certainty of the readers' inconsistency, the friability of the most astute constructions constitutes the profound truth of books. Since appearances limit it, what truly exists is no longer the growth of lucid thought but its dissolution in common opacity. The apparent immobility of a book deludes us: each book is also the sum of the misunderstandings that it occasions.[18]

Bataille translator Stuart Kendall highlights an instance where the sincerity of Bataille's thought was made explicitly known to his peers. In his introduction to *On Nietzsche* Kendall describes a lecture given by Bataille on sin and the discussion that followed it.[19] The philosopher and Nietzsche translator Maurice de Gandillac, in attendance, is reported to have commented:

> "[...] if there were those among us who might occasionally doubt the profoundly authentic character of your experience and of your whole book, this suspicion has absolutely been dispelled by the tone even of our conversation." [...] Arthur Adamoc observed: "It is very rare, in our day, to simply hear a man speak with an intonation that is truly his own, that conveys a personal message." Skeptical before his thought, Bataille's listeners were convinced by his intonation, his sincerity, his way of being in the world.[20]

To capture such sincerity now, in this academic context especially, is a difficult task—perhaps a futile one. In exploring their work I feel a demand to make myself vulnerable in my experiences of the exhibition and its surrounding events, in the hope this will better reveal the stakes of the exhibition and this essay. It is in the attempt; the process that their ethics is revealed. Whilst Bataille's approach "opens the issues of his

---

[17] COUM's sincerity too is lost in the sparse documentation available which likewise is entangled in the paradox of being unable to capture itself.
[18] Georges Bataile. *On Nietzsche*, trans. Stuart Kendall. (New York: SUNY Press), pg. 177
[19] This lecture would later become, after some revisions, the previously quoted "Summit and Decline" section of *On Nietzsche*.
[20] Stuart Kendall. "Translator's Introduction" in Georges Bataille. *On Nietzsche*. (New York: SUNY Press), pg. *xvii*

concern to the illumination and ventilation of what has been excluded from disciplinary discourse",[21] I cannot hope and do not wish to match or imitate Bataille's approach to thought and writing. It is also not my intention to follow his lead in subverting academic convention. If COUM's work is no longer shocking, the folding of subjective experience within academic writing most certainly isn't either. Again, this is not to say that the politics of the personal are dulled but rather demand a closer reading than ever before.

To write in this manner is nonetheless a challenge to do well. In order to communicate this ethics I feel I must make myself vulnerable but nonetheless leave space for you, the reader, to place yourself within this text. To communicate sincerely, I must do so in a way that is true to my own way of being whilst nonetheless challenging myself and, perhaps, you also. It is my hope that the wound I open here, at the end of this essay, is capable of being entered and helps to articulate further the ethical stakes of this unusual and incomplete exhibition.

[21] "Editor's Preface" in *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille: Community and Communication*, ed. Andrew J Mitchell and Jason Kemp Winfree. (New York: SUNY Press, 2009), pg. *x*

3

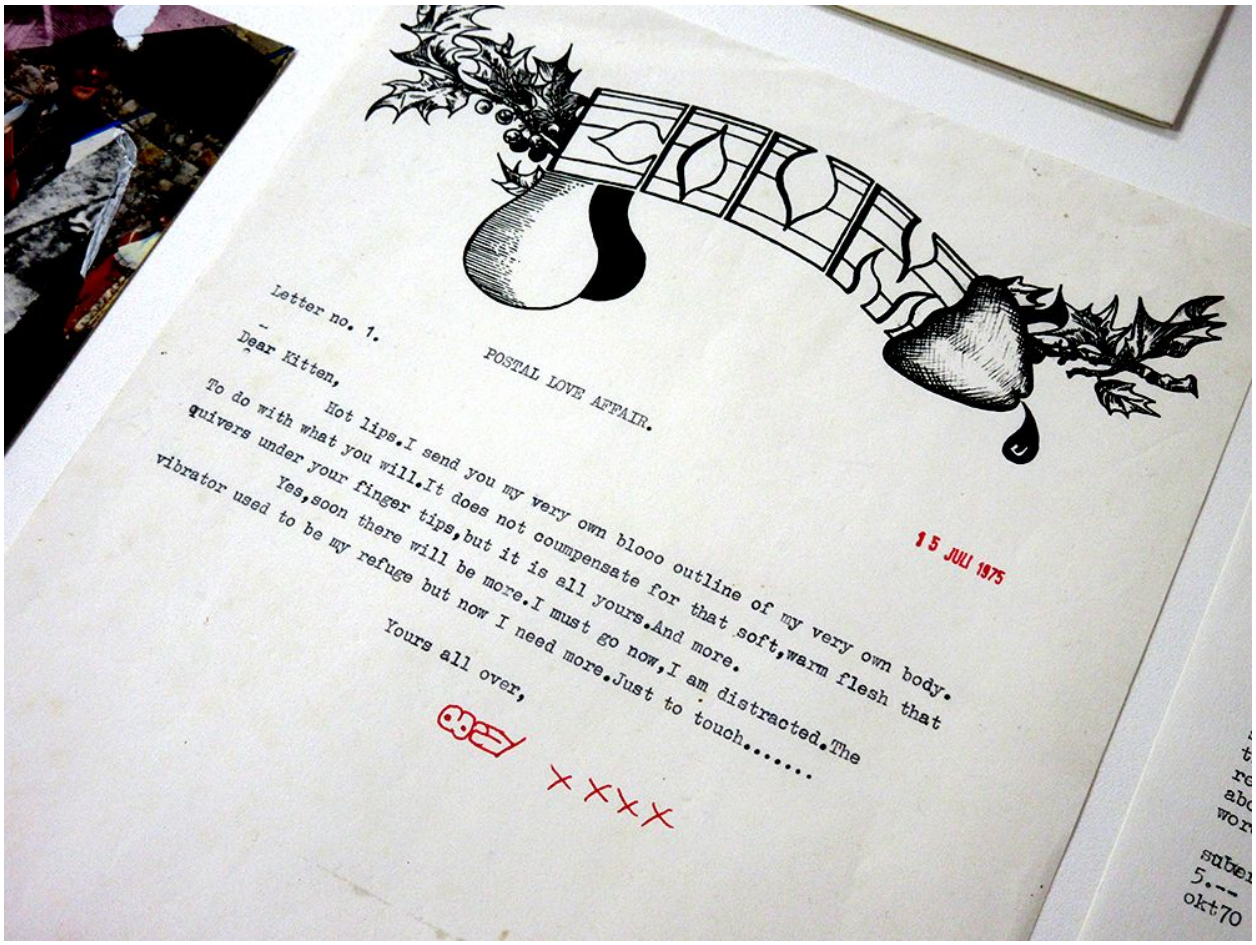

Fig. 4: Cosey Fannti Tutti. *Postal Live Affair*. 1975.

When Adrian Searle declared “you had to be there” in his review of the Humber Street exhibition, he seemed to desire some sort of digestible statement; a concrete, predetermined narrative. However, I suspect his expectations are informed by the very myths and reductions that have plagued COUM for decades. This letter from the exhibition, *Postal Love Affair* (fig. 5), captures the reality more clearly. COUM sought to repeatedly engender the strangely erotic tension of interrupted gestures. One of the group’s more well-known advertorial aphorisms declared that “COUM guarantee disappoint”. In this way, their approach is both tantric and tortu(r)ous. The desire to want to be there, as Searle expresses, is surely the emotional affect of this guarantee in its very incompleteness. That is not to say that COUM are

above criticism but, like Sartre to Bataille, Searle's reasoning is already purposefully folded within COUM's representations of itself.

Any document of the group is intentionally incomplete and it is this incompletion that makes COUM so compelling; that brings their *coummunity* into existence. Likewise with Bataille, whether dead or simply inactive, their incompleteness demands the conversation be continued. Paul Mann writes of Bataille's legacy as an "exquisite corpse"[22]—referring to the playful act of collective assemblage popularised by the Surrealists—and this is an apt formulation for COUM also: to write on either necessitates a mutant continuation of their projects.

The incompleteness of Bataille's exquisite corpse is emphasised by the number and nature of the texts that have been written "about" him since his death. The question of how well many of these texts have grasped the true implications of his "community" is another matter. Central to much of his thought is not only the question of "communication" but also "community"—and indeed the *com-* prefix more generally.[23] Outside his writings, Bataille explored notions of communication and community through his instigation of the groups *Acéphale* and the College of Sociology. Many of the experiences had amongst these groups necessarily elude capture and, with regards to *Acéphale* in particular (and similarly to COUM), many of their activities went unrecorded. Bataille's encounters with other communities were arguably best explored through his entangled fictions, letters and diaries. Jason Kemp Winfree writes:

> The obsession with community in Bataille's work can thus be divided, heuristically at least, between a practice and a knowledge, or better still, between a revolutionary practice and a theoretical inquiry, a heterogeneous zone of disruption and a homogenous understanding directed toward an account of the heterological itself.[24]

For COUM, no such attempt at division has been made. Whilst community for Bataille was an obsession that has since been written about at length, COUM have previously appeared in just one unreliable tome. Simon Ford's *Wreckers of Civilisation* is arguably *the* starting point for COUM research—understandably, since it was, until very recently, the only book of its kind on the group. Its scope is impressive but it is nonetheless an attempt at an objective and historicised account of a group that actively resist objectification and historicisation. Whilst it is a detailed account of their public activities, it is nonetheless superficial as an account of the group's spirit.

---

[22] Paul Mann. "The Exquisite Corpse of Georges Bataille". *Masocriticism.* (New York: SUNY Press, 1999), pgs. 51-70
[23] "...meaning 'with,' 'together,' 'in association,' and (with intensive force) 'completely'". "Com-". *Dictionary.com*. Accessed 18/04/2017: http://www.dictionary.com/browse/com-
[24] Jason Kemp Winfree. "The Contestation of Community" in *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille*, ed. Andrew J Mitchell and Jason Kemp Winfree. (New York: SUNY Press, 2009), pg. 32

COUM may be unpopular within academia but they share with Bataille a "negative community"—a community of those who have no community—and one that is still somewhat intact thanks to a lack of over-theorising. A particularly apt extension of this concept comes from Bataille's close friend Maurice Blanchot. In his book *The Unavowable Community* Blanchot writes of the "exigency of community", which Bataille kept raw through his "own infidelity, the necessary mutation which forced him to be unceasingly an other while remaining himself and to develop other exigencies which resisted becoming united either because they responded to the changes of history or to experiences, which, not wanting to repeat themselves, had become exhausted."[25] The community of the posthumous Bataille, however, falters precisely through the repetitive academic attempts to define it.

COUM (and the group's later shifting formations[26]) remain open. Their often violent infidelity was at its peak during COUM's most active years during the 60s and 70s. Cosey Fanni Tutti, in a recent interview on BBC Radio 4, discussed the forever-brawling "pockets of different groups of people [in Hull]—Mods, Rockers, then turned into skinheads and Hell's Angels and then the peace-loving hippies who didn't want to fight at all."[27] COUM interacted with all these groups and more. Genesis P-Orridge had come to the city to study at Hull University where he received both awards and accusations of obscenity for his literary activities. According to Simon Ford, "by the time he left Hull P-Orridge was a fully initiated member of The Nomads, the local Chapter of the Hell's Angels."[28] Together COUM sought an active entanglement of Hull's academic and criminal factions and a perpetuation of communal tensions. The connections of the other members of the group only expand the group's collective associations and so the infidelity of their *coummunity* is well established.

Here the necessity of the alternative spelling of *coummunity* is revealed. It is much like Bataille's "communication" in inverted commas in that it suggests a communication and community that the words themselves cannot do justice. As Andrew J. Mitchell and Jason Kemp Winfree explain:

> In the face of an entire set of tired contemporary invocations of "community" in the service of global capital and power — the world community, the intelligence community, the business community — Bataille's thought stands as an outrage if not a crime. But it is no less an affront to the progressive or utopian revolutionary desire for the restoration of a lost social order, one that would heroically or salvifically put an end to the ostentatious

[25] Maurice Blanchot. *The Unavowable Community*. (New York: Station Hill Press, 1988), pg. 4
[26] Not only Throbbing Gristle but also Psychic TV, Chris & Cosey, Carter Tutti, Carter Tutti Void, CTI, Coil, X-TG and a myriad of other collaborations and projects that are still (to varying degrees) active today.
[27] "Woman's Hour". *BBC Radio 4*. Broadcast 31/03/2017. http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08k1b4v Accessed 01/04/2017.
[28] Simon Ford. *Wreckers of Civilisation: The Story of COUM Transmissions and Throbbing Gristle*. (London: Black Dog Publishing, 1999), pg. 3.7

> expenditures of capital. For it is not an extant community to which one belongs or from which one receives one's meaning that is invoked by Bataille; he privileges no nation, religion, or ethnicity. Rather, what is most exceptional in this thinking of community resists conceptualization as positive appropriation, and it is this that leads [Jean-Luc] Nancy to speak in terms of ''inoperativity" and Blanchot to intimate the "unavowable," even where these formulations falter or say too much. As these determinations attest in all their care and difficulty, Bataille's obsession with community is an attraction to what the concept of 'community' has never been able to grasp.[29]

COUM were active participants in various cultural spheres—the art world, the theatre world, their local communities. Their mail art practices brought them to the attention of many diverse, global communities. The group's performative practices were also not unique by the standards of 1970s performance art. Some of performance art's most controversial pieces had their premiere performances during this decade—Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1974), Marina Abramović's *Rhythm 10* (1973), Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1972) and Joseph Bueys' *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974) to name but a few of the most well-known examples, and COUM were particularly influenced by the Viennese Actionists—but all these connections and associations still fail to grasp what it meant to be COUM; to be a part of their *coummunity*.

Many of the actions mentioned above, each controversial in their own way, nevertheless took place within the relative confines of the art world. To reduce COUM to any particular sphere of influence, particularly one focussed on cultural production (transgressive or otherwise), is to do them a disservice. Their boundless infidelity is perhaps what made them so unpopular with the more explicitly defined institutions of the art world and the state. By encouraging a cross-pollination between communities, COUM became gatekeepers of various social ruptures, making them the focus of various socio-political frustrations.[30] The tensions that these associations reveal, though, help to illustrate a principle of insufficiency central to Bataille's conception of community. Bataille writes in his essay *The Labyrinth*:

> At the basis of human life there exists a *principle of insufficiency*. In isolation, each man sees the majority of others as incapable or unworthy of "being." [...] The sufficiency of each being is endlessly contested by every other. Even the look that expresses love and admiration comes to me as a doubt concerning my reality. A burst of laughter or expression of repugnance greets each gesture, each sentence or each oversight through

[29] Andrew J Mitchell and Jason Kemp Winfree. "Editor's Introduction: Communication and Community" in *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille: Community and Communication*. (New York: SUNY Press, 2009), pg. 1

[30] The group maintain that they left Hull for London due to a sustained campaign of harassment by the police who took issue not only with their practices but also their associations.

> which my profound insufficiency is betrayed—just as sobs would be the response to my sudden death, to a total and irremediable omission.[31]

Whilst life is painted as an experience of incessant turmoil and conflict, human life without communication would be the very denial of human nature. Expanding on this principle of insufficiency, Blanchot writes:

> A being, insufficient as it is, does not attempt to associate itself with another being to make up a substance of integrity. The awareness of insufficiency arises from the fact that it puts itself in question, which question needs the other or another to be enacted. Left on its own, a being closes itself, falls asleep and calms down.[32]

COUM's lack of structural integrity is one of their defining (as well as undefinable) characteristics. A "being" in this sense can perhaps be extended to any attempt at a formal totalisation, its insufficiency echoing the Deleuzian "body without organs". There is an insufficiency to all beings—whether that be the human being or the body politic.[33] Whilst Genesis P-Orridge and Cosey Fanni Tutti alone enacted some of the group's most violent performances, the enduring porosity of the group becomes a questioning of itself that demands an equal questioning of the integrity of the groups they come into contact with. They always were and remain an incomplete body enacting instances of incomplete communication at all scales, creating ruptures within language as well as larger social structures.

In one notebook from the exhibition (fig. 5), art becomes an acronym—the "Ability to Receive and Transmit". To abbreviate their name to COUM is not to forget the importance of the word "Transmissions". Transmission, in this sense, is an almost medical contamination between selfhoods; ipseities. Paul Mann, in his essay on Bataille, writes:

> One must experience one's *ipseity* autoaggressively through the other, indeed through one's aggression toward the other. Communication is precisely the contest, the confrontation of ipseities. Writing is thus communication in two senses: a proper sign of the individual's meaningless ipseity, discovering itself by throwing itself against another; and a fatal breach of the organism's integrity, expressing and expending itself.[34]

---

[31] Georges Bataille. "The Labyrinth" in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), pg. 172
[32] Maurice Blanchot. *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris. (New York: Station Hill Press, 1988), pg. 5
[33] Cf. Georges Bataille. "Base Materialism and Gnosticism" in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), pgs. 45-52
[34] Paul Mann. "The Exquisite Corpse of Georges Bataille." *Masocriticism*. (New York: SUNY Press), pg. 59

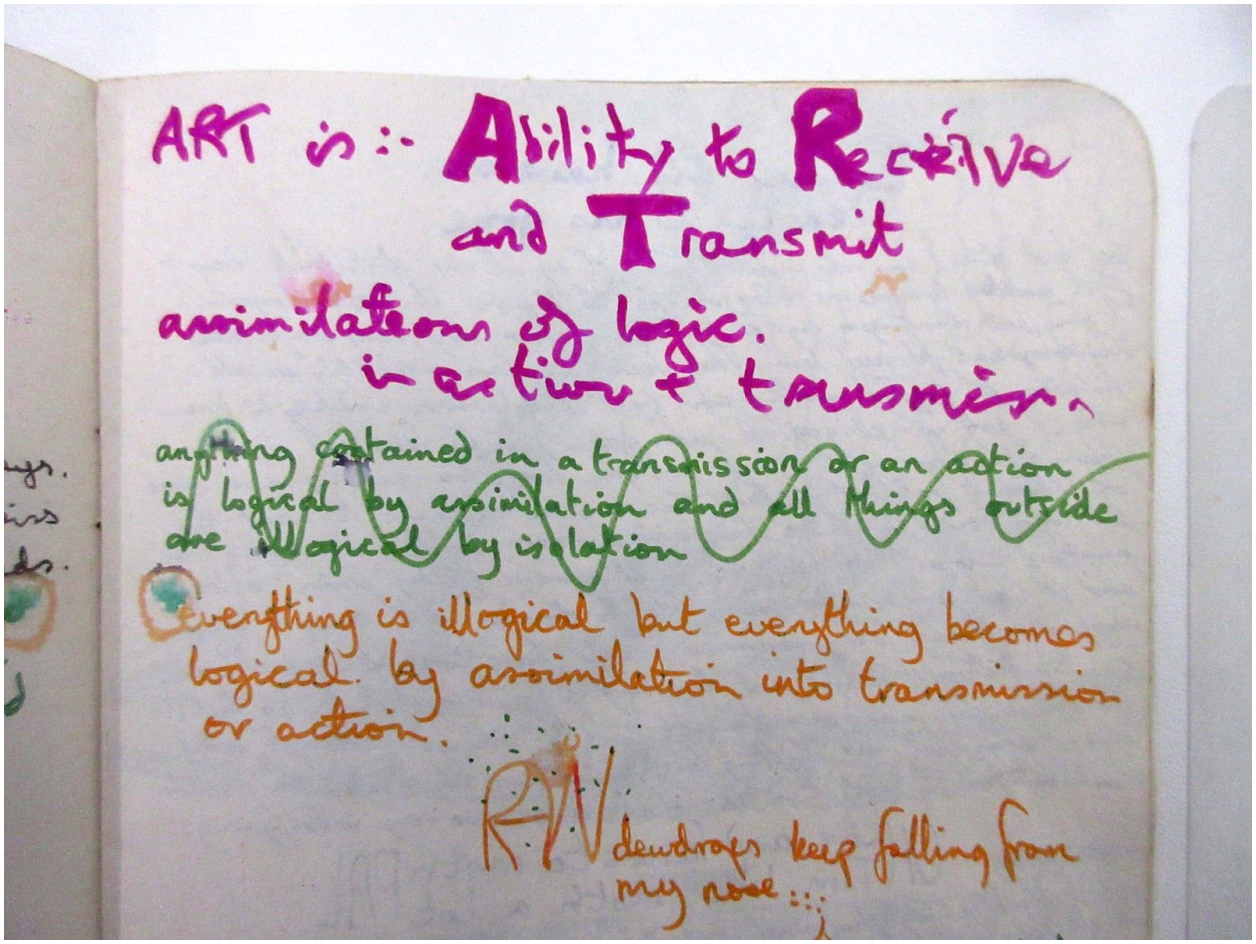

Fig. 5: COUM Transmissions. Untitled Notebook.

Mann's use of the word "autoaggressive" suggests a behavioral equivalent of "autoimmune"—a word that generally refers to a disease "caused by antibodies … produced against substances naturally present in the body"[35]—echoing Cosey's previously quoted statement that COUM wish to give "to people what they already have, but that which has been buried by years of varying human ideals and standards." But these transmissions are nonetheless folded within COUM's way of being. Art may very well be the ability to receive and transmit but the boundaries of art in itself for COUM remain undefined, much like *coummunication*; *coummunity*; life itself. For Bataille also

> communication does not name [...] a transmission passed between the two poles of sender and recipient, each of which would precede the communication. Rather,

[35] *Oxford English Dictionary*. (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2010), pg. 108

> "*existence* is communication" as it finds itself overstepping its own bounds, itself, reaching toward the other: "everything in me gives itself to others!"[36]

It is not hard to see, then, how *coummunication* was diagnosed as the transmission of a social disease that threatened to wreck civilisation. Whilst the desire to communicate may be an inherently ethical desire, it is left open to the possibility that it may be rejected by the receiving body. Sometimes communications break down, making explicit its complicity with evil—"Communication in the most fundamental sense is [...] an expropriation of the self without the security or certainty or regularity of knowledge."[37]

Mann continues:

> Writing is the impossible communication of the impossible. What Bataille wants to communicate is an infectious and a fatal disease. He sought a writing, a *pensée* [thought], that would be the very *dépense* [expenditure] it described. […] But can *dépense* be communicated? Can it be given in a text, or is the text never more than a substitute, a surrogate, a *parody* of a convulsive experience it can never finally comprehend? Has Bataille's writing sacrificed itself, expelled itself through its pineal eye, burned itself up in its own glorious sunlight? Has it communicated its death as death? […] Do his readers become the *community* he envisioned by witnessing his sacrifice and being present at his second death, his philosophical death, or do they reassemble his body for another use, return his gift to the restrictive economy, and hence ruin everything sacred about him?[38]

Here, Mann's essay reads like an exquisite corpse in itself. This paragraph in particular is a collage of Bataillean terms spanning the breadth of his oeuvre. It demonstrates well how Bataille's work remains slippery and cumbersome to handle. Mann's text is so dense here that it is hard to say whether it ruins Bataille or not. Mann suggests that "Bataille critics tend at a certain point to become self-critics of their appropriation of Bataille."[39] Discourse surrounding COUM seems to have no similar self-awareness but Simon Ford's history of COUM is precisely a reassemblage that ruins everything "sacred" about the group. Does the Humber Street exhibition, by presenting a series of openings; of letters and their replies;

---

[36] Andrew J Mitchell and Jason Kemp Winfree. "Editor's Introduction: Communication and Community" in *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille: Community and Communication*. (New York: SUNY Press, 2009), pg. 9
[37] *Ibid.*
[38] Paul Mann. "The Exquisite Corpse of Georges Bataille." *Masocriticism*. (New York: SUNY Press, 1999), pg. 60
[39] *Ibid.*, pg. 63.

fragments of wider, longer conversations, allow for the sacred to once again contaminate their project? Is it possible to write on COUM, here, now, in this context, without ruining their project?

4

Fig. 6: *Art Sex Music* display at Rough Trade East

Last night I attended the launch of Cosey Fanni Tutti's autobiography *Art Sex Music* at London's Rough Trade East (fig. 6). To my frustration, and much like during the COUM exhibition's opening weekend, I had a cold. The receiving and transmitting of bacteria, never mind art, makes me reluctant to open my mouth to speak in case I breathe on anyone, stifling my attempts to communicate. After a Q&A and book signing, I spend an hour on the bus home. I learn through an opening author's note that the book is intrinsically entangled with the conception of the Humber Street exhibition itself:

> As I was researching for an exhibition, going through some of my old diaries to fact-check, I got totally distracted and drawn into my past and ended up reading for hours. I finally closed the diaries and put them back in the cupboard, all chronologically

> lined up, like my story in waiting. I knew at that moment what form my book would take. If I was going to enter the lion's den of my past, it would be by using my diaries as my primary source. They offered an unblinkered view into my mindset of that time, and I could avoid the misty goggles of retrospection.[40]

Bringing the reader right up to the present, the Humber Street exhibition is discussed on the book's final pages:

> A combination of what seemed unrelated factors had come together, fulfilling all the necessary conditions for me to begin work on writing my autobiography. I'd come full circle: from Hull, the place where my life and my art began, and where my book would begin, and now back there, marking where my book will end as I enter into a new dialogue with Hull, in recognition of my life and art.[41]

Elsewhere, Cosey details the extent to which she has been sidelined and undermined throughout her artistic career due to sexism (amongst other things). She details many personal and private attacks—most shockingly made by Genesis P-Orridge whose track record of emotional and physical abuse towards her is truly abhorrent—as well as elaborating on the curatorial decisions made on her behalf. Discussing curatorial decisions made prior to *Prostitution*'s opening, she explains:

> it was decided that my sexually explicit magazine works could not be shown on the main gallery walls for legal—and what was described as 'diplomatic'—reasons. Not just that, but they would be housed in boxes and form part of a members-only exhibition in a separate room at the back of the main gallery—to be viewed 'on request' and only by members of the ICA. [...] I always felt this was, intentional or not, like relegating the magazines to a place comparable to their original context—in a back room, an under-the-counter situation like a Soho sex shop. Sex shop to gallery to back room. All it needed was a dusty velvet curtain in the doorway.[42]

The atmosphere at the Humber Street Gallery could not have been more different. The police were apparently called to the gallery during the opening weekend but, in contrast to *Prostitution*, "as soon as

---

[40] Cosey Fanni Tutti. *Art Sex Music*. (London: Faber & Faber, 2017), pg. *ix*
[41] *Ibid.*, pg. 498
[42] *Ibid.*, pg. 202

the police heard the word 'Tate' it was alright."[43] Chased from the city for their old associations, now welcomed back under the wing of their new friends, the disjuncture of COUM's newfound acceptance has not been lost on Cosey:

> "[...] I don't like acceptance, I distrust it completely, I think I've done something wrong, like I've gone off on a bad tangent and need to get back on track." She pauses. "I mean, I understand why certain things have found their place in history, so I can accept that. But I don't see it as acceptance of what I did then, because it wasn't. It's still loaded with that unacceptance."[44]

Still following Paul Mann's thought, he notes what he calls Bataille's "second death": following his first death; his physical death, ending the immediate and literal continuation of his thought, his second death occurs at the hands of the reifying thesis mill of accepting academia[45]:

> Even as it is theory's task to disrupt every system it has proposed, even as we depend on it to do so, it is also theory's task entirely to close off the ruptures on which it entirely depends. This endless, exhaustible circuit constitutes the fatal exhaustion of theory. There is no means of taking transgression into account that does not endorse it as a restricted economic term *in the first place* and subject it to a perpetual, garrulous, undying death. And since this cycle repeats itself compulsively: still the mute and irrecuperable trace of the second death.[46]

I wonder if this folding of the unacceptable within COUM's newfound acceptance results in their "second death"—or perhaps a second life. *Prostitution* was their first retrospective; their first death—a self-immolation that the press sought to extinguish and disembowel on their own terms, making COUM martyrs for their cause and engendering decades of misunderstandings. The Humber Street exhibition is a second retrospective for which COUM's restless corpse has been reanimated so that it might continue to wander with the gait the group had intended for it. Is the exhibition successful in this regard? To rephrase Mann's questions, do the visitors to the Humber Street exhibition become the *coummunity* the

---

[43] Cosey Fanni Tutti. *Live Q&A with Luke Turner.* Rough Trade East, Brick Lane, London. April 5th 2017. The Tate purchased Genesis P-Orridge's archive in 2008 and many of the Humber Street exhibition's materials were borrowed back from them.
[44] Alexis Petridis. "Cosey Fanni Tutti: 'I don't like acceptance. It makes me think I've done something wrong'". *The Guardian*. Published 14/03/2017: https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/mar/14/cosey-fanni-tutti-throbbing-gristle-coum-art-sex-music-hull-2017 Accessed 15/04/2017
[45] Cf. Paul Mann. *The Theory-Death of the Avant Garde*. (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons., 1991).
[46] Paul Mann. "The Exquisite Corpse of Georges Bataille." *Masocriticism*. (New York: SUNY Press, 1999), pg. 70

group envisioned by being present at their second death? Or does this exhibition reassemble COUM for another use, ruining them for good?

COUM are, of course, being reassembled by one of their own and it is arguable that the previous iteration of COUM should be ruined—at least the lingering idea of it in the minds of their fans. During the opening weekend panel discussion, when the audience were called upon to ask questions, many romanticised COUM's hardships and miseries—and there were certainly many of those. Most of the group were adverse to viewing these difficult personal circumstances as an extension of COUM's performative activities. Those circumstances led to the group's various fractures after all. Unavoidable, perhaps, considering the group's practices, but unenjoyable nonetheless.

What is apparent from Cosey's autobiography and other recent public appearances is that she has often worked silently amongst these hardships, in accordance with an ethics of her own. Her subjective views of events and materials, no matter how critical and damning, do not interfere with the collective work itself. The artwork has long been completed but in moving forwards into a new era of acceptance, COUM's original rupture is held open by Cosey through her curatorial activities as she reshapes it for new encounters in the present. Whilst the group stands by its experiments and its attempts to push interpersonal and societal boundaries, it does not do so facetiously, and it is now Cosey who has taken it upon herself to clarify the personal difficulties that have followed in their wake.

During the Rough Trade Q&A, Cosey spoke about Industrial Records—the record label begun by Throbbing Gristle in 1976 that went on to release records by themselves and others as well as giving name to the genre "industrial music". The sound of the genre is often described as reflecting the sound of factories and machine work; of industry, taking its name very literally. Cosey, alternatively, described "industrial" as an ethics— "to be industrious" as a folding of life and work ethics.[47] Cosey's is perhaps a "work" ethic that stretches far beyond our traditional conceptions of work— immediately apparent in her sex work[48]—and extending in particular to other gendered forms of labour that she undertook whilst a member of COUM, particularly the ephemeral work required to hold the group together, whether that be housework, sex work, factory work or emotional labour.

Chris Gemerchak, in an essay reflecting on Bataille's ethics of community, writes:

---

[47] Cosey Fanni Tutti. *Live Q&A with Luke Turner.* Rough Trade East, Brick Lane, London. April 5th 2017.

[48] The phrase "sex work" is, of course, a recently popularised decisive nomination of practices that campaigners continue to struggle to be classed—legally—as a form of economic labour, as work. It is a fitting turn in phrasing considering COUM's own play on the word "prostitution", exacerbating the wider labour struggles faced by other outsider groups of "workers" by aligning and entangling their artworks with the word's more generally negative connotation.

> [Bataille's] rethinking of ethics thus shifts from the expression of moral ideas about the best way to act in order to achieve the greatest good—or normative ethics—to a manner of relating to exceptional, ostensibly meaningless moments that happen quite independently of a subject's intentions. Furthermore, by being open and attentive to these moments—not for the gain they might bestow on us but for what they are in themselves—the possibility arises to generate a new type of relation to being itself, to the "truth" of being(s) in communication. His ethics is in effect an *ethos*, a manner of being in the world. It is not, however, merely passive, but involves a distinct method of "contestation": it *repudiates the economy of goods* insofar as it "really wants that each of us go as far as possible in the direction contrary to interest".[49]

Gemerchak positions Bataille's ethics as attempting to exist outside of capitalism and its centralising of self-interest and self-preservation. What is described seems to apply very well to stereotypical "women's work"—"work" unrewarded by capitalism that Cosey's art has often highlighted and challenged; "work" that is currently central to many contemporary feminist post-capitalist discourses.[50] COUM's improvisational practices—like the practices of many of their peers—invoke this relating to "exceptional, ostensibly meaningless moments" but COUM alone use these practices to critique, directly and indirectly, notions of value and labour. Cosey emerges as the individual who is most communally minded within the group, as the central Bataillean figure within COUM who, through her curation of the the exhibition and the writing of her autobiography, mirrors Bataille's own problematic entanglements of individual perspective and collective being.

---

[49] Chris Gemerchak. "Of Goods and Things: Reflections on an Ethics of Community" in *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille: Community and Communication* (New York: SUNY Press, 2009), pg. 66-67

[50] Cf. Helen Hester. *Promethean Labours and Domestic Realism*. https://www.academia.edu/11571359/Promethean_Labours_and_Domestic_Realism Cosey has previously rejected alignments with feminism since many feminists of her generation were part of the group of proverbial pitchfork-wielders. I wonder, however, if she sees her influence within feminist thought today or if she views this acceptance just as suspiciously.

5

The stakes of Cosey's work brings to mind the central conversation that has emerged around Bataille's sense of community between Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot, particularly their conceptions of "work" and "worklessness".[51] Defining the latter, Blanchot writes in his book *The Infinite Conversation*:

> The absence of the work nonetheless always cites the work outside itself, calling it always in vain to its own unworking and making the work re-cite itself, even when it believes it has its sights on "the outside" that it does not fail to include—rather than working to exclude it.[52]

Here Blanchot seeks to challenge the paradoxical concept of the Work, used in the sense of a completed project. Blanchot is referring specifically to the book as the literary work which fails, in itself, to capture the work of the writing that has gone into it, echoing Bataille's reasoning in his response to Jean-Paul Sartre. Blanchot's exploration here is poetic and reads like a linguistic ouroborus—his is a book that eats itself. Performance art and its recording shares many similar problematics but the diagnosis of the problem could not be more poetic and enchanting than within the literary. Nevertheless, the Humber Street exhibition undoes itself in its inability to share the very activities that constituted COUM's works. The correspondences instead attempt to illustrate this unworking; this worklessness.

Jean-Luc Nancy uses this concept of worklessness to articulate an "inoperative community"—a community which undoes the singular beings that constitute it, so relevant to COUM. He articulates—via Bataille—the role of communication in this process:

> Community necessarily takes place in what Blanchot called "unworking," referring to that which, before or beyond the work, withdraws from the work, and which, no longer having to do either with production or with completion, encounters interruption, fragmentation, suspension. Community is made of the interruption of singularities, or of the suspension that singular beings *are*. Community is not the work of singular beings, nor can it claim

[51] A conversation that explicitly inspired the essay collection *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille* from which the Germerchak quotation is taken.
[52] Maurice Blanchot. *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pg. 420

> them as its works, just as communication is not a work or even an operation of singular beings, for community is simply their being—their being suspended upon its limit. Communication is the unworking of work that is social, economic, technical, and institutional.[53]

Blanchot and Nancy's joint exploration becomes in itself a conversation; a correspondence that lasts for decades. Nancy was to have the last word in his essay *The Contested Community*, written shortly before Blanchot's death in 2003:

> Juxtaposed yet also opposed to the "inoperative" in the title of my essay, his adjective [Blanchot's "unavowable"] invites one to think that beneath the worklessness of inoperativity (*désoeuvrement*), something—an unavowable work—is at work nonetheless.[54]

What is touching about this essay in particular is that Nancy's writing is far more open in comparison to his more familiar, difficult style of writing. It is punctuated with self-reflexive moments that shine a light on the time within which he is writing—specifically alluding to the aftermath of the World Trade Centre attacks of September 11th 2001. He positions himself inside his own thought and Blanchot's also, reflecting specifically on the intimacy of their shared thinking. Through the very process of their communications, whether in articles and books or in private correspondences, Bataille's thinking truly reveals itself.

Later noting the commingling of texts in *The Unavowable Community*—Blanchot writes not only on Bataille's theoretical texts but also on Marguerite Duras's short fiction *La Maladie de la Mort*—Nancy asks:

> What has been shared? Probably something—the "unavowable," then—that Blanchot points to in the second part of his book and in the very fact that in this book he pairs some reflections about a theoretical text with others about a tale of love and death. In both cases Blanchot writes relating them, and he writes his relation to these texts, which he also relates to one another in this way. He keeps the two texts distinct, it seems to me, by offsetting one with a negative consideration of "inoperativity," whereas the other would give access to a community, albeit one that is not "worked" or "achieved" ["*oeuvrée*"], but

[53] Jean-Luc Nancy. *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pg. 32

[54] Jean-Luc Nancy. "The Confronted Community", trans. Jason Kemp Winfree in *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille: Community and Communication* (New York: SUNY Press, 2009), pg. 24

> one that is carried out in secret (an unavowable secret) in the sharing out of an experience of limits: the experience of love and death, of life itself exposed to its limits.[55]

This pairing of distinct texts brings me back to Cosey's entangled work on both a second COUM retrospective and her own autobiography. These texts—their developments and emergences overlapping—communicate with each other, at once individual and collective. I find myself considering the design of the book's cover (visible in fig. 6). It features a portrait of a young Cosey, her mouth covered by a red rectangle containing the book's title—*Art Sex Music*. A humorously reductive title, there is similarly a humour to the visual suggestion that Cosey is gagged on the cover of a book totalling 500 pages, but it also suggests an honesty with regards to the futility of telling her own story.

Whilst Cosey's diaries form the basis of the book, they are revealed only in fragments. The book steams ahead, recounting memories, feelings, encounters, and then ends unceremoniously—no rose-tinted conclusions, just an empty space where the story could continue. For a book that says so much, telling such a compelling story, there still seems to be so much left unsaid; so much that cannot be said—experiences that reveal themselves between the lines of text, much like the experience of reading between the lines of the Humber Street exhibition. For all of Cosey and COUM's transparency, the group still harbour a wealth of secrets. Nancy writes:

> The secret is unavowable because it is incommunicable. But it is unavowable and not just incommunicable. If it were only incommunicable, it would be a mystery reserved for some divinity floating outside of the common and concealed under the veil of a prohibition. As unavowable, it is of the order of what is effective and well known by those who take part in it—well known by all of us and evident in its own way, manifest in all our communications, our commerce, our contracts, and our sexual intercourse.[56]

I feel I know this well, having immersed myself so fully in Bataille and COUM. Nancy too later articulates the influence of his correspondences with Blanchot on his thinking with community. He continues:

> I have not gone farther, until now, to resume this analysis, as I could have done specifically by responding in my turn to Blanchot's text. I have not done so in my few letters to him, since letters should not be mixed up with texts; there is an appropriate

---

[55] Jean-Luc Nancy. "The Confronted Community", trans. Jason Kemp Winfree in *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille: Community and Communication* (New York: SUNY Press, 2009), pg. 26
[56] *Ibid.*, pg. 24

> order for texts to communicate among themselves. (Moreover, what is a *correspondence*? What kind of *co-* or *com-* is engaged here?)[57]

When Nancy speaks of a secret it seems to warrant the application of aforementioned extensions—extensions perhaps worth establishing as a rule for reading Bataille if rules were not counterintuitive to his thought—namely, that what is truly meant by a word ruptures the boundaries of the word itself. What happens when I try to answer (briefly) Nancy's question of correspondence? The *co-* and *com-* remain ever present and perhaps articulate this secret best in the linguistic insufficiency of the isolated prefix. They require something else to activate their latent "togetherness". To deconstruct the word "correspondence" in particular is illuminating. Not only is it the word for written communication but it also refers to a close similarity, connection or equivalence. Its etymological parts speak to the "with", "together", "in association" of *co-*, the act of responding and a state of being respondent.[58] It speaks directly to a collective state of communicative being. Nevertheless, all this analysis resembles—to borrow from Bataille—is the dissection of a lifeless organ.[59]

As I fight the temptation to ruminate on individual words I become increasingly aware that I am transplanting longer and longer quotes from other readers of Bataille. I feel critical of the community I am myself entering and appropriating but feel there is no alternative but to quote others at length. The end of Blanchot's book in particular looms large as I feel myself reaching the end of this essay:

> *The unavowable community:* does that mean that it does not acknowledge itself or that it is such that no avowal may reveal it, given that each time we have talked about its way of being, one has had the feeling that one grasped only what makes it exist by default? So, would it have been better to have remained silent? Would it be better, without extolling its paradoxical traits, to live it in what makes it contemporary to a past which it has never been possible to live? Wittgenstein's all too famous and all too often repeated precept, "Whereof one cannot speak, there one must be silent"—given that by enunciating it he has not been able to impose silence on himself—does indicate that in the final analysis one has to talk in order to remain silent. But with what kinds of words? That is one of the questions this little book entrusts to others, not that they may answer it, rather that they may choose to carry it with them, and, perhaps, extend it. Thus one will discover that it

---

[57] Jean-Luc Nancy. "The Confronted Community", trans. Jason Kemp Winfree in *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille: Community and Communication* (New York: SUNY Press, 2009), pg. 24

[58] See: "Correspondence". *OED*: https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/correspondence; "Com-". *Dictionary.com*: http://www.dictionary.com/browse/com-; "Respondence". *Merriam-Webster*: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/respondence All accessed 18/04/2017

[59] Georges Bataille. "The Labyrinth" in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), pg. 172

> also carries an exacting political meaning and that it does not permit us to lose interest in the present time which, by opening unknown spaces of freedom, makes us responsible for new relationships, always threatened, always hoped for, between what we call work, *oeuvre*, and what we call unworking, *désoeuvrement*.[60]

Is the naming of these responsibilities a worthy exercise? Are these responsibilities the secret of an immersed communal praxis? The exquisite corpse of Bataille's thinking—Nancy and Blanchot and Mann's also—evokes an anxiety within me as if, at any moment, it will emerge as a cognitive Frankenstein's monster, necessary to set adrift and yet nevertheless threatening to enact its revenge on my own readings and arguments. This anxiety looms larger in my use of COUM. I have promised that I will share this essay with a number of those involved in the Humber Street exhibition. I shudder at its inherently reductive nature. Returning to Bataille himself I find his writings the most elucidatory as I try to grasp my own academic anguish.

> The very fact of assuming that knowledge is a function throws the philosopher back into the world of petty inconsistencies and dissections of lifeless organs. Isolated as much from actions as from the dreams that turn action away and echo it in the strange depths of animated life, he led astray the very being that he chose as the object of his uneasy comprehension. "Being" increases in the tumultuous agitation of a life that knows no limits; it wastes away and disappears if he who is at the same time "being" and knowledge mutilates himself by reducing himself to knowledge.[61]

This problematic of this essay is, of course, of little trouble to anyone but myself. Written principally for examination at Goldsmiths, University of London, it nonetheless feels like a testimony addressed to those within my immediate community and beyond. COUM extend far beyond my own concerns. Despite their associations with the Tate and others, COUM continue to hold their "secret" aloft. In 2017 they have revealed more of their secret than many can possibly hope to process in a single gallery visit or reading. Correspondences and texts are kept separate here too—exhibitions and autobiographies communicate amongst themselves—but the presentation of the two once again opens up ruptures; wounds that drift across each other. COUM's secret invites each viewer, each reader to navigate their very secret for themselves; to infer the incommunicable that lurks in the shadows of the communicated. To do this, however, requires precisely an industriousness. My own industriousness is also perhaps unavowable, but I don't intend to remain silent on its circumstances…

---

[60] Maurice Blanchot. *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris. (New York: Station Hill Press, 1988), pg. 56
[61] Georges Bataille. "The Labyrinth" in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), pg. 172

?

Loneliness clarifies. Here silence stands
Like heat. Here leaves unnoticed thicken,
Hidden weeds flower, neglected waters quicken,
Luminously-peopled air ascends;
And past the poppies bluish neutral distance
Ends the land suddenly beyond a beach
Of shapes and shingle. Here is unfenced existence:
Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach.[62]

This stanza from Philip Larkin's poem *Here* is one of the most famous descriptions of the psychogeographic affect of living in Hull. Situated at the eastern end of the M62, the city has previously drawn little attention from the rest of the country (except to mock its post-industrial stutterings[63]). Liverpool, at the western end of the motorway, has its own unique version of this phenomenon but Hull has continued to exist in apparent isolation for most of the post-war period. COUM and Throbbing Gristle have, on many occasions, reached a negative community of those who too face the sun, untalkative and out of reach—myself included.

In September 2013, having finished three years of undergraduate study in South Wales, I moved back to my hometown of Hull. Shortly afterwards, when the city won its bid to become the UK's City of Culture in 2017, I threw myself into lobbying for a COUM retrospective as something to distract myself from the stresses of unemployment and a difficult home environment. As a teenager Throbbing Gristle had made me reevaluate the potentials of the city I lived in. I wanted to see their iterations acknowledged more than anything during the 2017 festivities and I felt like the best way to ensure this was to make some noise about them for myself. Unbeknownst to me at the time—although now clarified in Cosey's autobiography—discussions were already underway:

> I'd been revisiting my past for some time, firstly through the exhibiting of my magazine works and COUM actions, [...] and I'd begun working with Andrew [Wheatley] on sifting

[62] Philip Larkin. "Here". *The Whitsun Weddings*. (London: Faber & Faber, 2001)
[63] The lowest point arguably being when Hull was voted the #1 worst place to live in the UK in the national best-seller by Sam Jordison and Dan Kieran. *Crap Towns: The 50 Worst Place to Live in the UK*. (London: Boxtree; Main Market edition, 2003).

> through my archive in preparation for an exhibition that would include my work as COUM. That was under way when, in November 2013, Hull was announced as the winner of the UK City of Culture for 2017 and Andrew Dixon, who had led the bid for Hull, tweeted me saying, 'Look forward to welcoming you back to #2017Hull to do new work.'[64]

Unaware of this, I kept tweeting and others joined the chorus:

> There were calls on social media to include myself and COUM in the Hull 2017 programme. I started getting tweets and emails, so did past COUM members Spydeee and Les. It was great that so many people were championing the COUM cause but it was very early days and would need a lot of careful thought.[65]

Soon tweeting was not enough and I found myself working towards the project for three months, doing research around the local area, mapping a network of old COUM associates in the hope of tracking down previously unseen materials. I scanned local newspaper archives at Hull History Centre, spoke to Cosey and Spydeee Gasmantall and then to a local gallery who wanted to host the exhibition.

Then, one morning in early 2014, I received a bewildered email from Cosey. She and others were feeling uneasy about the project. They also wanted it to happen but felt they were being told different things by different people:

> Although I acknowledge and greatly appreciate the enthusiasm and genuine interest in people's intentions, any presentation must have some cohesive structure in order for me or others to consider the lending of original material and my participation.[66]

I was embarrassed, unaware of any other lines of communication. It turned out that, whilst I had been working in apparent isolation and preparing a formal exhibition proposal, the gallery had been doing the same thing, taking the research I had shared with them and hiring others to continue it without informing me. My intention to put across a confident and unified front—acutely aware, as I was, of my own inexperience—was undermined. I was also struggling to find paid work and so felt taken advantage of. I eventually moved to Cardiff, finding that living in Hull at that time was detrimental to my mental health and my living situation was stopping me from fully engaging with the local community in a way that I felt I

---

[64] Cosey Fanni Tutti. *Art Sex Music*. (London: Faber & Faber, 2017), pg. 498
[65] *Ibid.*
[66] Private correspondence with Cosey Fanni Tutti from March 2014

needed to to live a fulfilled life. Following this move to Wales, my involvement with the project ended. The gallery's involvement ended also.

Looking back on my emails from Cosey now, I am struck by her generosity and openness. She speaks of collaborating further and finding a way of working together on the project; of making sure all further communications were collective so that everyone was on the same page. In my memory, she was angry with me but it seems that this was not the case. I was, however, very angry with the gallery and my frustration at how difficult they were being to work with blinded me to a more open invitation from Cosey herself. Now writing this essay, three years later, I am deeply saddened by the irony of the project faltering at this time due to a lack of communication and it is fair to say this essay was born out of this lingering anguish.

—-

February 2017: the exhibition opens to the public following three years of hard work by Cosey Fanni Tutti, Andrew Wheatley, Sophie Coletta, Luke Turner and many others. The atmosphere is welcoming, honest and open, but it was still not without its tensions. Prior to the opening weekend, some of the members of COUM had not spoken to each other for decades. There was an air of uncertainty that not everyone would get along.

During the first panel discussion, the members of COUM were reticent to give the city of Hull any credit for their genesis. COUM could have come into existence anywhere, they said—no doubt trying to offset their inclusion in the City of Culture organisers' superficial project of city-wide self-esteem boosting. Whilst this may be true, their project of communication was needed in Hull more than elsewhere, even if—at the time—the city was not yet ready to listen. These tensions emerged again during a second panel discussion held later that same day.

"Reading COUM" was convened by the exhibition's co-curator Andrew Wheatley and it was intended to be a collective reading of COUM's legacy within the context of the contemporary art world. Chaired by writer and artist Ghislane Leung the panel also featured writer and editor Paul Buck, editor of *Frieze* Dan Fox, and writer and former editor of *The Wire* Anne Hilde Neset. The painfully dry discussion was interrupted by a man who introduced himself only as Brooke. He had once played guitar with COUM, aged 15, he said. He shouted to the panel: "You hated us, you drove COUM out of Hull" and "I'm sick of you lot talking a load of posh shite".

His five-minute tirade decried the panel's retroactive acceptance of a group that vehemently opposed the kind of reification that this panel represented. The "you", I assumed, referred more generally to the Big Other of a metropolitan cultural elite.[67] Surprised and no doubt feeling accosted, the panel offered Brooke limp and sarcastic thanks into their microphones. The interruption went unaddressed and I left not long after the panel's discussion continued.

It must be noted that Brooke's outburst was not unwarranted. He had previously been vocal during the first panel of the day, hovering at the side of the stage, loudly concurring with the on-stage reminiscing. Whilst some seemed irritated by his participation, everyone knew better than to clarify the delineation between performer and audience at a COUM event, even one so civil as a panel discussion. Despite the second panel's advertised focal point, Paul Buck had onanistically spent half an hour talking about himself and little else. Buck was the only panel member present for many of COUM's actions[68] but he spoke unnecessarily at length about his background as part of London's experimental literature and theatre scenes during the 1960s and '70s. Rather than choosing to heckle the panel, other audience members had simply walked out. Brooke took a more COUM-worthy approach (by his own reckoning, at least).

"What is at stake…?" was no longer a question of considered academic distance. It had reemerged as a question of immediate political proximity. The conversation instigated, antagonistically but appropriately, by Brooke was not allowed to continue. His outburst was resolutely ignored. The panel had failed in its attempts to communicate with its audience and it resulted, in that moment, in a breakdown of relations with an other.

On the train back to London the next day, I sat at a table across the aisle from the members of the "Reading COUM" panel. Ghislane offered me a smile of recognition. I smiled back. Full of cold, I didn't communicate and I frustrated myself in my hypocrisy. I think to myself: if communication is the focus of the exhibition as well as the focus of my essay, then a sensitivity must be given to all these communicative tensions—both in the present and as previously pondered by COUM and Bataille. That is not to say that Brooke's outburst or my own experiences should function as case studies of the exhibition's ethical implications but within an exploration of "community" and "communication" it is necessary to allow these interactions to be included in order to preserve the ruptures of "communication" and resist the limiting effect of "discourse".

---

[67] This *ressentiment* is a relatively pervasive part of Hull's psychological makeup rather than being COUM's sole prerogative. Hull is a city that has always positioned itself in conscious cultural opposition to the nation's capital.
[68] Cosey notes his support in particular after the chaotic opening day of the ICA exhibition in her autobiography.

I have not *lived* COUM and Bataille's projects this academic year through violence or transgressive practices but ruptures have nonetheless opened and I have sought to hold them open. Unrelated to COUM, the death of Goldsmiths lecturer Mark Fisher has been a rupture more cataclysmic than any previously mentioned here (for my personally), but the difficulty of holding that rupture open has led to the forming of a porous intimacy and the intensifying of many relationships through our attempts to communicate with one another. My own communications to others have been, on occasion, difficult and wounding, my mind and the body screaming out not to go through with them. Acting against such anxious, grief-stricken and visceral intuition has brought so much strength to our wider community. My readings of these texts and this exhibition have informed life outside the boundaries of this essay in a way that cannot be done justice here but should nonetheless be mentioned.

—-

I am currently sat in the cafe bar of the Humber Street Gallery. It's 6.30pm. In an hour I will be next door in Fruit—an independent music venue that opened in 2010. Everything else has—quite suddenly—sprung up around it. The *City of Culture* programme has brought not only the new Humber Street Gallery but a host of trendy bars and restaurants to the street that was, until relatively recently, home to little but abandoned warehouses. From my seat in the bar I can see the numbers "eleven" and "15" hanging over the quiet doorways of what I assume are would-be restaurants and bars, rendered in shining acrylic plastic and signifying little for the moment. Luxury flats are due to be built somewhere nearby but I'm not sure where exactly. Maybe they're already here, tucked above the hollow spaces. The area is explicitly unfinished; incomplete but it has already become a "*place to be*"; a place to gather for legalised frivolities.

I am on my second pint of *Dark Matter*, one of three beers from a presumably local brewery called Atom. All the names relate to science. *Quantum State* is the name of another. The third: *Phobos & Deimos*—the two moons of Mars; the sons of Ares, the god of war, in Greek Mythology; twin brothers personifying horror. I shared my first pint of *Dark Matter* with Andrew Wheatley—co-curator of the exhibition. I hope to talk to him about the process of curating the show but he is here this weekend on a "jolly" and I can't find the right moment. We talk about his next exhibition instead—manuscripts and materials from the archive of the similarly transgressive literary figure Pierre Guyotat.

Having eaten little today the second pint is going to my head. I am left alone as the rest of our disparate group of event participants and their friends go off in search of fish and chips. I try to write seriously on COUM before the evening's performances, hoping that sitting here with the exhibition situated directly above me will make it easier to write, but the opposite happens as I get closer and closer to the bottom of my glass.

Fig. 7: Carter Tutti Void on stage at Fruit, Hull—18/03/2017

My thoughts keep returning to Bataille's *Guilty*:

> Drunk, I found myself on the platform for the metro Strasbourg-Saint-Denis not long ago. I wrote on the back of a photograph of a naked woman. Amid the nonsense I wrote: "Not communicating signifies exactly the bloody necessity of communication."[69]

Right now I feel more of an urge to talk than to write and perhaps that is what Bataille means; needs; wants. I have no photographs to write on, although I have of course taken my own, some of which are presented here. Photographs anchor my personal experiences and yet, in their formal separation from experience itself, eviscerate the "I" in their testimony. A notebook and pen languish in my bag, neglected through my reliance of technology. I am using my laptop right now, but it is cumbersome—perched on this small round table, a pint of beer inches away, its charger is hanging precariously in mid-air plugged into

[69] Georges Bataille. *Guilty*, trans. Stuart Kendall. (New York: SUNY Press, 2011), pg. 22-23

the wall a few feet behind me: an irresponsible setup in my increasingly drunken state. I feel the need to communicate *now*. The future communication that this essay will enact when it is finished is not enough... Hello, reader…

Cosey is unfortunately too busy to talk to me about my essay. As the release date of her autobiography looms, she is preoccupied with book signings. My essay deadline is at the end of April. She says she would be happy to talk in May. We meet in person for the first time just prior to her performance with Carter Tutti Void (fig. 8). I have been invited backstage by Sophie and Luke and I am sitting across from her. She looks across at me and smiles, unsure of who I am. I introduce myself as she gets ready to go onstage and she thanks me for doing so. Later, after the performance, she comes over and sits next to me. She asks how my research presentation went in class. I say it went fine and then we talk about other things. Someone brings out a birthday cake. The conversations shift and turn as conversations do. We talk some more together and then with others. It's a lovely, jovial atmosphere and I am so happy to meet everyone. There have been opportunities since to ask Cosey questions but I cringe at the thought of being so self-absorbed. There will be other times in other places. Or perhaps there won't. I grab another beer from what was once an ice bucket, now just a bucket of water.

Later in bed, writing down my thoughts in my notebook, the room spinning around me, I worry that most of conversations had over the weekend were irrelevant to this essay, but it doesn't matter.

> I write a book: I have to put my ideas in order. I am diminished in my own eyes, sinking into the details of my task. In discursive form, thought is always attention to one point at the expense of other points, it tears man away from himself, reduces him to a link in the chain that he is.[70]

It is now the morning after the night before. The majority of my essay is unfinished but it nonetheless feels appropriate to write the ending now; to leave it unfinished. My thoughts turn to the potential encounters ahead of me prior to the essay deadline and beyond it. Cosey says she's sorry that she's busy before my hand-in. I tell her I'd love to talk in May regardless.

> In the end, only chance retains a disarming possibility.[71]

---

[70] Georges Bataille. *On Nietzsche*, trans. Stuart Kendall. (New York: SUNY Press, 2013), pg. 136
[71] *Ibid.*, pg. 109

Fig. 8: The author of this essay outside 8 Prince St, Hull—COUM's one-time HQ—in 2011

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My conversations with Cosey Fanni Tutti, Andrew Wheatley, Luke Turner and Sophie Coletta have only been general but have informed my approach here more than they could know. My conversations and correspondences with my tutor Jean-Paul Martinot, undertaken in various stages of emotional distress unrelated to this essay, have changed me and informed my wider thinking with regards to my immediate community of peers incalculably. To say my research has shaped my very way of being sounds too grandiose but nonetheless feels truthful to me. The relegation of these comments to a footnote is not to undermine their importance. They are external to this text, otherwise unspoken, but it feels right to bring them to light.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Andrew J Mitchell and Jason Kemp Winfree (ed.)

The Obsessions of Georges Bataille: Community and Communication. (New York: SUNY Press, 2009)

Cosey Fanni Tutti

Art Sex Music. (London: Faber & Faber, 2017)

Georges Bataille

Inner Experience, trans. Stuart Kendall. (New York: SUNY Press, 2014)

Guilty, trans. Stuart Kendall. (New York: SUNY Press, 2011)

On Nietzsche, trans. Stuart Kendall. (New York: SUNY Press)

Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939, ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985)

Jean-Luc Nancy

The Inoperative Community, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991)

Maurice Blanchot

The Infinite Conversation, trans. Susan Hanson. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993)

The Unavowable Community, trans. Pierre Joris. (New York: Station Hill Press, 1988)

Paul Mann

Masocriticism. (New York: SUNY Press, 1999)

Philip Larkin

The Whitsun Weddings. (London: Faber & Faber, 2001)

Simon Ford

Wreckers of Civilisation: The Story of COUM Transmissions and Throbbing Gristle. (London: Black Dog Publishing, 1999)