



“TO BE IMMERSED IN THE EXPERIENCE OF NOW”

Artists Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard use music to connect to their audience

Interview by Earl Miller

Since attending Goldsmiths College in the mid-90s, London-based Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard have collaborated on projects related to rock music. From re-enacting concerts, to producing self-portraits of themselves as pop stars, to using compilation tapes as a starting point for narrative videos, to revisiting early video art in music-video format, Forsyth and Pollard continue to use music and its relation to its audience as a context for producing a versatile, subjective and often intimate body of work.

EARL MILLER How has rock music affected your work?

IAIN FORSYTH/JANE POLLARD Music as straightforward subject matter has never interested us, but we do borrow heavily from the ways music operates and connects with an audience. The singer/songwriter Momus has had a major impact on us. Through him, we discovered the enor-

mous possibilities the Internet offers for connecting directly with an audience.

We're excited by music's potential to act as a psychological mnemonic device; our focus is always on the potential impact on one person's mind. Using the framework of live music has allowed us to emotionally unhook our audience's personal narratives, the "I remember where I was when I first heard this song" kind of memories, a whole series of personal re-enactments played out with the event as backdrop. Our work relies on provoking a mass will to participate and to be immersed and interactive in the experience of "now." For us, re-enactment was the most powerful tool available for re-framing "now"—a short-circuit to a more authentic experience and a democratic possibility for audience participation.

EM In 2006, you were included in *Switch*

Forsyth & Pollard, Production still from *Walking After Acconci (Redirected Approaches)*, 2005

on the Power! [Museum of Contemporary Art, Vigo, Spain], in which artists exhibited alongside musicians such as Peaches and Siouxsie Sioux. Is this a context you consider ideal for exhibiting your work?

IF/JP It's certainly a context we're happy with. Ultimately, if our work gets seen by a wider audience because people are drawn to an exhibition that also features well-known musicians, then we're good with that.

EM What originally motivated you to recreate rock concerts?

IF/JP We've never been particularly interested in the past. Nostalgia can be a useful device, but we've always been much more concerned with the present moment. That's what initially drew us to performance. However, the idea of re-enactment was a half-baked, untested theory that "re-experiencing" an event grounded in the present would open up a possible space of familiarity where each audience member is freed up to participate. Our primary interest was in creating a direct, emotive and immersive impact on the audience, something experiential before analytical. The psychological effect on the individual of being in time with the familiar, of knowing what's coming, initially fascinated us. Our first "complete" re-creation of a rock concert was *A Rock 'N' Roll Suicide* at the ICA in London in 1998. Prior to that, our live work had explored the idea of repeating the broad brushstrokes of the past, but it did not attempt to replay past events literally. Re-enactment wasn't established in the wider culture then. It was a fringe activity—community groups restaging historic battles and a handful of tribute bands. It was an embarrassing endeavour, mostly the domain of hobbyists and freaks. However, it served our purpose well. Re-enactment as a specific act, though, became less interesting to us as it became more generally understood and embraced by all areas of the media.

EM How do your early video works—such as *Japanese Dream* (1997), which shows Jane making Iain over to look like Robert Smith of the Cure—relate to your re-enactment projects?

IF/JP Although this work on the surface relates directly to our re-enactment projects, the starting points were different. These pieces include some of the earliest

works we made together when we met as students. We were beginning to come to grips with using video. The medium appealed to us because it happens in real time and because things can appear "life size." Instinctively we used video unedited, always a single take, shot in real time and played back so the images were as close to actual size as we could manage. The camera became an imagined viewer, standing in for the absent audience at the time of the "performance." Consequently, the camera became a co-conspirator, a third, silent collaborator. The visual language we understood and borrowed from was that of television and music videos. And of course, although we didn't realize it then, obvious comparisons could be drawn to the early video works of artists such as Nauman and Acconci.

EM Is it safe to say you approach music video not strictly to critique, as artists such as Dara Birnbaum and Pipilotti Rist did, but as a valid subject matter in itself?

IF/JP To truly connect with our viewers on an emotional level, we can't treat television (the camera, the monitor, the screen) as a medium; we have to treat it, and its complex impact on the social and cultural landscape, as a context. Music videos provide a useful, accessible and entertaining contemporary visual language. As video makers working today, it's hard not to assume that our imagined viewer will be familiar with reality TV, MTV and TV advertising. Or they might watch in real time the farce of the Bush and Blair administrations, seeing shaky handheld footage from Iraq one minute and the heavily stylized handheld footage of TV shows like *24* the next. Television in the West is part of our social and cultural fabric: you can no longer turn it off. Earlier generations of artists have made work that perfectly acknowledges and understands television as a medium that can play with your relationship to it and its imagined relationship to you. Much of this work shares a simplicity and freshness because of this pure approach to the medium and context. To us, however, it doesn't seem possible to make work for a contemporary audience on this same level of simplicity.

EM Can you name your 10 favourite music videos?



Forsyth & Pollard, Production still from *Walk With Nauman* (Re-performance *Corridor*) featuring Nikki Trow, 2006



TOP Forsyth & Pollard, *Kiss My Nauman* (No. 1, *The Searchlight*), 2007

MIDDLE Forsyth & Pollard, *Kiss My Nauman* (No. 2, *The Demon*), 2007

BOTTOM Forsyth & Pollard, *Kiss My Nauman* (No. 4, *The Catman*), 2007

IF/JP Like most people, a list of our favourite anything is going to change from moment to moment. Presently some of our favourite videos include:

- "Subterranean Homesick Blues" (Bob Dylan)
- "Fifteen Feet of Pure White Snow" (Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds)
- "Dry Your Eyes" (The Streets)
- "Stand and Deliver" (Adam Ant)
- "Jean Genie" (David Bowie)
- "Stop Your Crying" (Spiritualized)
- "Shine Like Stars" (Primal Scream)
- "Just Like Honey" (The Jesus and Mary Chain)
- "Henry Lee" (Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds and PJ Harvey)
- "Elephant Gun" (Beirut)

EM While you produce work referencing consumerism via music video, by placing music video in an art context, you remove it from its purpose of selling music, from "top 10 culture," as referred to above. Do you consider your work to lie outside of consumerist culture, to be part of it, or a bit of both?

IF/JP Few cultural practices truly sit outside of consumerist culture, and our work certainly doesn't try to, but the engagement is perhaps different. While clearly for some artists, it's important to try to step outside of consumerist culture, it's not something that concerns us on either a personal or political level. Over the years we've worked with public and private institutions, commercial galleries, museums and public spaces, collectors, private patrons and government funding. Different projects work in different ways, some overtly commercial, some less so.

EM In *Walking After Acconci* (*Redirected Approaches*) (2005) you hired a professional MC to play Acconci, and he rapped as he would in a music video — and in *Walk With Nauman* (2006) you shot Nauman's seminal contrapposto body sculpture in a style that recalls an R&B video. What led to altering the original Acconci and Nauman pieces using the music-video form?

IF/JP A few years ago, we were asked to give a talk at the ICA in London about the relationship between video and performance art to accompany their exhibition *Video Acts* (touring from PS1 in New York). We gave ourselves a couple of days to spend

time with the work in the exhibition. By the end of the first day, we both came away absolutely entranced by Acconci's *Walk Over* (*Indirect Approaches*) (1973). We'd avoided Acconci's video work until that point, simply because so many people had told us we would love it! But we both came away from the ICA with that piece imprinted firmly in our minds, and, having had exactly the same thought, we both began manically talking about urban music videos. We wanted the role of the protagonist to be taken by a young MC, so we began asking friends and contacts in different areas of the music industry for recommendations. Several people suggested we look at Ben Drew, who records under the name Plan B. At that point, he hadn't finished his album, although he had signed a deal with 679 Recordings (home to The Streets), who sent us some video footage of Ben playing in tiny clubs — just him and an acoustic guitar, an incredibly bold thing for him to be doing in underground Grime clubs in east London. As soon as we saw the tapes, we knew he was perfect. We contacted him and began discussing the project. While not particularly impressed with the Acconci video, Ben was into the concept and understood what we were trying to do. Together we began working on revising the script and made the piece.

Furthermore, we're interested in artists who key in to the intrinsic use of repetition. Acconci's *Walk Over* is a series of approaches, a repetitive monologue and repetitive actions: walking, smoking, singing and approaching the camera. Nauman's *Walk With Contrapposto* (1968) is a repetitive journey up and down a narrow, man-made corridor. They're both hypnotic, rhythmic, almost musical pieces. We're fascinated by the "dual time" of the cover, a time belonging to a "before" that continues revealing itself in the "now."

EM Acconci's and Nauman's video work is slow, low-tech and focused on a single action — not unlike the low-budget home video, which also plays an important role in pieces such as *Japanese Dream*. Music video is, of course, typically fast, high tech — a collage of multiple images. Can you comment on the contrast arising from merging these contradictory formal strategies?

IF/JP You're right, most music videos use a quick turnover of images, with several visual narrative strands playing out and in-

terweaving to enhance the experience of hearing the record and to keep the viewer from being distracted. That said, some of the most memorable and effective music videos use an almost single-action shot; think of Feist's "1 2 3 4," Massive Attack's "Protection," REM's "Imitation of Life," Bob Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues," The Mountain Goats' "Woke Up New," Verve's "Bittersweet Sympathy," Radiohead's "Idioteque," Iron and Wine's "Naked as we Came" and even Will Young's "Leave Right Now." There's something much more intense and compelling about the single shot, one narrative/subject focus, unedited approach. It's the closest the camera and monitor come to being a mirror or a container of a sort of reality. The medium isn't getting in the way of the message; the edge of the frame is ambiguous. You're temporarily suspended in a limbo between being outside and inside the frame.

EM For over a decade, a number of artworks have either directly referenced or recreated early conceptual art, the best known of these perhaps being *Fresh Accoñci* (1995) by Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy. Do you see a relationship between your *Accoñci* and *Nauman* pieces and other contemporary conceptual works?

IF/JP Honestly, it's not something we've really given any thought to. Clearly, there's a relationship on a number of superficial levels, but it's not something we're consciously aware of or attempting to reference or investigate through the work.

EM With your most recent piece, *Kiss My Nauman* (2007), a recreation of Bruce Nauman's *Art Make-Up* film series (1967-68) in which you film the Kiss tribute band *Dressed to Kill* as they are putting on make-up, you come full circle in a sense by incorporating your earlier concert re-enactments using tribute bands (e.g. The Who and The Smiths) with more recent work referencing first-generation conceptual art. I am wondering, then, how this piece connects to these prior works?

IF/JP To us, there isn't really a direct line to be drawn between this project and some of our early performance-based works, other than perhaps a knowing smile. It's funny, we often seem to be associated with working with tribute bands,

but this is something we only did a couple of times. We very quickly found it just didn't work for us, so we began putting our own bands together specifically for our projects. The idea for *Kiss My Nauman* originated a year or so before we made it. At first we dismissed the idea, thinking it was probably too flippant. But given the context of being asked to produce a new work for Jarvis Cocker's *Meltdown Festival*, and knowing the work would be seen largely by audiences on their way to concerts taking place as part of the festival, it suddenly felt like the right thing to do. And we were delighted to find the right opportunity to make it.

EM With the advent of MySpace and YouTube, music video has entered a new phase where average folks wanting to broadcast themselves as pop stars appropriate its format. Pop celebrity is therefore being perceived as increasingly accessible. Have such cultural changes affected the reading of your re-enactment and other work?

IF/JP The cultural framework for understanding re-enactment has shifted enormously in the past five years. People have always played out ideas, or daydreams, of placing themselves inside a pop video or celebrity moment—an individual, personal, imaginary (re-)enactment. However, the increasing accessibility of technology has allowed people to experiment with these ideas in reality and then share them. Re-enactment has moved from the difficult edges of culture to occupy a prominent space in the mainstream language of popular cultural expression. This shift has broadened the awareness and understanding of re-enactment, but it has also diluted the power it once held for us to act as a radical catalyst altering and double-exposing reality. We've moved away from re-enactment in its strict sense, as it's too safe, too central, a little impotent. We're looking for each new major project to be a challenge, a new, just-out-of-reach experiment, often doomed to fail but always sure to produce something dynamic and illuminating. ♦

Earl Miller is an independent art writer and curator with a particular interest in art's intersection with contemporary music.



Forsyth & Pollard, Production
still from *A Rock 'N' Roll
Suicide*, 1998
PHOTO: DAVID COWLAND