



INFLUENCES - 25 SEP 2014

Iain Forsyth & Jane Pollard: Influences

BY IAIN FORSYTH AND JANE POLLARD

From Samuel Beckett's plays to Nick Cave's music, the artists and filmmakers discuss the evolution of their artistic imaginations

Sometimes, an image hits you with such force that it continues to reverberate across decades. It changes something about who you are and who you might want to be. In 1980, for both of us, that image was Adam Ant frozen in a split-second video frame on the sleeve of his album *Kings of the Wild Frontier*. This saturated, interlaced video buzz spoke to two seven year olds on opposite sides of the UK. The sleeve gave us our first connection with a

mediated world – the hyperreal modern world inside the TV. It seems to defy being read as a two-dimensional image. It's a performance: static but alive with the noise of video.

Fast-forward through the 1980s and we witness our entire world shifting in this RGB vision: the rise of Thatcher, the Royal wedding, the Challenger disaster, the SAS storming the Iranian Embassy, the first 'AIDS: don't die of ignorance' advertisements, the Brighton bombing, famine in Ethiopia, Live Aid, riots in Moss Side and Brixton, finding the wreck of *Titanic*, the Falklands War, the Lockerbie bombing, the launch of Channel 4, the Berlin Wall coming down. Video told two teenagers: 'This happened; this is real.'



Adam and the
*Ants, Kings of the Wild
Frontier, 1980.*
Courtesy: the artist
and Epic

As we became better able to read the jagged mesh of convex television screens and videotape, we also learned that it was malleable. As artists, this is the surface that excites us. In 2003, we re-created a VHS bootleg of The Cramps playing at Napa State Mental Hospital (*File Under Sacred Music*). We planned to achieve the same deterioration of surface through digital post-production but, within a couple of hours, we knew it was a lost cause. And so began an elaborate re-enactment of the bootleg's journey: we converted PAL to NTSC, re-filmed it off a TV screen and physically damaged the tape stock. This process of acting and re-enacting is, for us, about freezing a moment, making it jitter with the noise of then and now.

The first video art to leave its mark on us was Bruce Nauman's *Good Boy Bad Boy* (1985). We got an instant hit from seeing it; it has the same impact every time we re-visit it. The charge is immediate, emotional and hard to articulate, as it diminishes through analytical distance. The work is simultaneously reasonable and preposterous. It lets you in on shared humour and knowingness. Nauman showed us that repetition works. We also learned this from Can and Andy Kaufman, but it was Samuel Beckett who would, in time, become our most enduring inspiration.



Bruce Nauman, *Good Boy Bad Boy*, 1985, two colour video monitors, two video players and two video sources, installation view. Courtesy: Sperone Westwater, New York, and DACS, London

Of all Beckett's works, we return tirelessly to *Not I* (1972), performed by Billie Whitelaw in 1973. So many of our influences orbit around this time when Britain was in the throes of the oil crisis, power cuts and the three-day week: the time we were born. It's also when Vito Acconci produced *Theme Song* (1973), itself a sort of reimagining of Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958).

We avoided Acconci for a long time. When people say, 'You'll love this guy,' it tends to turn us off. So it wasn't until 2003, when the ica in London asked us to speak about the 'Video Acts' exhibition of single-channel works from the Kramlich collection, that we relented. And thank fuck we did. Acconci's *Walk-Over (Indirect Approaches)* (1973) provoked our *Walking After Acconci (Redirected Approaches)* (2005). It kicked off a strand of new work for us using reconstruction, revision and superimposition.

There's something delicious about discovering an artist and finding out they've been working

for more than 30 years. It's like discovering your new favourite band has an enormous back catalogue still to explore. And that 1973 sweet spot is rich with music which inspired and continues to inspire us: the first, eponymous, New York Dolls album, Lou Reed's *Berlin*, John Cale's *Paris 1919*, *For Your Pleasure* by Roxy Music, Can's *Future Days*, *Raw Power* by The Stooges and David Bowie's *Aladdin Sane*. This was the year that Bowie killed Ziggy Stardust on stage. Exactly 25 years later, we produced what was to become our final live art work at the ICA. *A Rock 'N' Roll Suicide* (1998) re-enacted this legendary 'farewell' performance. We assembled a group of musicians and directed a move-for-move replica of the original.



Vito Acconci, *Walk-Over (Indirect Approaches)*, 1973, video still. Courtesy: the artist and EAI

We began collaborating at the start of our second year at London's Goldsmiths College. At the time, the only 'art duos' we'd heard of were Gilbert & George and Pierre et Gilles. It took us a couple of years to figure out what working together really meant but, in that time, we discovered what was important to us. To this day, our practice is built on the principles we established then. Early-1990s Goldsmiths was a place to get angry. We were disillusioned by rhetoric and theory being privileged over emotional engagement. Instead of name-dropping philosophers and waiting for Charles Saatchi to call, we started to look outside of the art school to find inspiration and kindred spirits.

At 'The Fete Worse Than Death', in 1993, we met Joshua Compston. He became a mentor, of sorts. We would meet most Sunday mornings in Shoreditch cafes and tape-record our conversations. These blew our minds wide open. Josh wanted us to document his thought processes, but we were just hooked by his self-belief and the scale of his ambition. His gallery, *Factual Nonsense*, may have been a heady mix of brilliance and bullshit, but he taught us that you should never shy away from crazy, bold intentions.

Through Joshua we met Gavin Turk. Gavin's 'Collected Works 1989–1993' show on Denmark Street was one of two exhibitions that have strangely merged in our minds. We saw them around the same time, and they shared a playfulness. The other was a memorial exhibition for the painter Andrew Heard. Misremembered and muddled through the passing of time, these shows have become contaminated with the meaning of each other. For two baby art students, who were just starting to face the prospect of life after college, these moments sung out. We were questioning whether we could be artists, whether we even wanted to be artists. These exhibitions said to us: 'You can do this.' More than that, they said: 'You must do this.' So here we are, 20 years later.



Guy Moberly, *Joshua Compston at 'The Fete Worse than Death', 1993*. Courtesy: Paul Stolper Gallery, London; photograph: © Guy Moberly

Music continues to play a huge part in our life and work. Last year, we made an ambitious sound installation with Scott Walker for Sydney Opera House. His records sit next to our turntable quietly acknowledging the futility of putting them back on the shelf. Alongside them is Bill Callahan's *Apocalypse* (2011), the first Suicide album (1977), *Psychocandy* (1985) by the Jesus & Mary Chain, *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet* (1971) by Gavin Bryars, *The Worst of Monte Cazazza* (1992), a stack of albums by Bob Dylan and Dirty Three, and the Philip Glass soundtrack for Errol Morris's 1988 documentary *The Thin Blue Line*. Music for us is time travel. A few notes are all it takes to derail the conscious mind and let the past come flooding into the present.

Books piled around our studio act as signposts to the ideas that continue to ignite our imagination. Magician James Randi's *Flim-Flam* (1995), books on Harry Houdini and the Loch Ness Monster, Antonin Artaud's *The Theatre and its Double* (1938), Raymond Carver's book of short stories, *Where I'm Calling From* (1993), *The Ether of Space* (1909) by Sir Oliver Lodge, Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1638), books by Billy Childish and books

about Jack the Ripper, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (2000) by Steven Connor, *Poetics* by Aristotle, Dylan Thomas, *How I Escaped My Certain Fate* (2011) by Stewart Lee and Charles MacKay's *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* (1841).



Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard, *20,000 Days on Earth*, 2014, film still. Courtesy: the artists and Picture House Entertainment

For the past couple of years, we've been working on our first feature-length film. We made *20,000 Days on Earth* (2014) with and about the musician and author Nick Cave. The project has sent us running back to many of the films that have inspired us over the years: *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) by Roman Polanski, Brian de Palma's *Phantom of the Paradise* (1974), *F for Fake* (1973) by Orson Welles, Joseph Losey's *The Go-Between* (1971), *Don't Look Now* (1973) by Nicolas Roeg and, also from the omnipresent 1973, our greatest inspiration of all, Lindsay Anderson's *O Lucky Man!*

Like the trigger-word of a stage hypnotist, *O Lucky Man!* is our shortcut to a creative kick up the arse. Watching it puts us back on track. We may not have a clue what direction we're going in, but we're dead certain we have the fuel and determination to get there. The vertiginous thrill of its scale of ambition stands for everything we're reaching for. *O Lucky Man!* is a fearless collaboration between screenwriter David Sherwin, director Lindsay Anderson and the star Malcolm McDowell. We know it's flawed, overlong and frequently ludicrous. We know it, but we can't see it. We won't see it.

These are the fleeting collisions that have shaped us. Their impact, in some other place, at some other time, would be different. From the huge and absurd to the tiniest mnemonic souvenirs dormant in a shoebox under the bed, we all need these moments, these objects, these ideas. These are the things we are.

INFLUENCES

MUSIC

FILM

NICK
CAVE

VITO
ACCONCI

DAVID
BOWIE

BRUCE
NAUMAN

IAIN FORSYTH AND JANE POLLARD

live and work in London, UK. They have collaborated since the mid-1990s. Performance and music play significant roles in their work. Their new film, 20,000 Days on Earth, a portrait of the musician Nick Cave, premiered at Sundance Film Festival earlier this year, where it won the Directing and Editing Awards in the category World Cinema Documentary. It will be released on DVD in the UK on 20 October. Their digital commission for Film4, The Museum of Important Shit, which 'catalogues the things that remind us of those transformative moments that make us who we are, and unlocks the stories connected to them' can be viewed at: 20000daysonearth.com. Forsyth and Pollard have been nominated for the 2014 Jarman Award: the winner will be announced on 8 December.



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