Guaranteed disappointment:

Punk graphic design at the Festival Hall

Neil Mulholland

The rip-off riff's authentic ring

A singer who can't really sing

Can only mean one fucking thing

Punk rock revival

Affect the look of a man obsessed

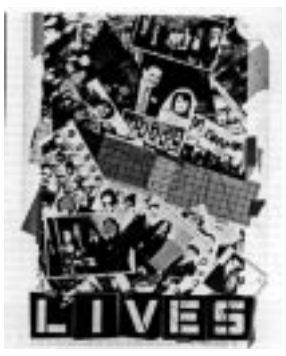
Predisposed to the predistressed

Now you know you're properly dressed

Punk rock revival[1]

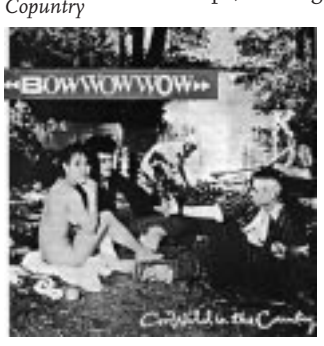
Following a stint of trouble-making at Croydon Art School, Jamie Reid began production of the Suburban Press, a publication which resulted from his disillusionment 'at how jargonistic and non-committal left-wing policies had become'[2] during the early '70s. It was while working on the Suburban Press that Reid made his most significant attempts to break out of the mould of Situationist artiness and the Left's agit-prop in-fighting. Four years later, his 'rip off' graphics and Helen Wellington-Lloyd's 'ransom note' lettering were the benchmarks of 'punk design'. Reid's graphic experiments did not occur in isolation. In general, the 1970s saw a steady growth in 'radical amateurism' as montage techniques were adopted by photoconceptualists, community photographers, feminists, and anti-fascists alike. MINDA's photomontage designs for the **Campaign Against Racism and Fascism**[3] confronted the rise of Fascism by drawing allusions between the images of the Conservative Party, the National Front and the Nazis. Reid, meanwhile, was carrying out an assault on the iconography of fascism. It would seem that for him, MINDA's strategies were examples of the simplistic propaganda they opposed. From placing a swastika in place of the Queen's eyes (**God Save The Queen**) to forming a swastika from marijuana leaves (**Never Trust a Hippy**), Reid ridiculed fascist iconography by striking at its very heart, de-centring its power by problematising the meaning of its imagery.

New Order
Procession 7" 1981



Barney Bubbles

The curators of *Destroy: Punk Graphic Design in Britain*—an exhibition of 400 record sleeves, posters and fanzines at the Royal Festival Hall on London's South Bank—have made little concerted effort to locate punk's contributions within a heterodox range of visual practices. However, this exhibition isn't about punk. It's about 'punk graphic design' and their histories are not necessarily identical. Writing in 1980, Peter York noted that the 'main thing that punk introduced was the idea of cut-ups, montage—a bit of Modern Artiness—to an audience who'd never heard of eclecticism. Punk was about changing the meanings of things'[4] a view which has been dusted down to champion the exhibits in *Destroy*. A problem here might be that such blow-dried approval was clearly intended to celebrate punk's recuperation into the spectacle against which—disciples of its mythical origins cherish to enlighten us—it ought to have rebelled against. Of course, as everyone is also advised, McLaren and Reid recognised from the beginning that delinquent subcultures, since created through the channels of the mass-media, could only simulate revolution.



Bow Wow Wow
Go Wild in the Copuntry

Perhaps, then, it is reasonable to claim that punk's anti-design stance had always made the whole enterprise peculiarly *arty*. Not according to another popular myth currently being rehashed, this being that punk designers were untrained, anonymous figures, their designs raw and uncouth, using anything that came to hand—their aim being to deface the designs of happy hippies trained at art school. It is true to say that many designers remain anonymous while designated designers such as Sabastian Conran, who produced promotional material for The Clash, were self-taught. Yet many celebrated punk designers *were* trained at art school, and for them plagiarism was more of a carnivalesque prank than political art terrorism directed against Western property values. Malcolm Garrett began designing sleeves for the Buzzcocks while still a student at Manchester Polytechnic, where he had developed a taste for International Constructivism: 'I began merging a number of things I liked, the pioneering type of graphic experiments like Futurism and Bauhaus from earlier in the century with stuff from pop art and Andy Warhol.'[5] In the summer of 1977, Garrett's fellow student (and future Assorted Images co-designer) Linder Sterling was finishing her dissertation on the sanitisation of punk. Her photomontage for the Buzzcocks **Orgasm Addict** (1977), while having obvious precedents in dada and surrealism, most closely mirrored the kinds of anti-consumerist montage produced by mail artists and feminist community photographers in the '70s, satirising imagery from magazines such as *Woman's Own*. Certainly such punk 'designs' were formally chaotic, irregular and harsh, while as 'cultural productions' they appeared subversive in intent. All laudable credentials for any aspiring subculture, but wasn't a very similar 'anti-aesthetic' to be found in the converse Hegelian logic of grunge-formalism which had demarcated 'fine art' from 'design' in most art schools since the late 1960s? *Destroy* is testament to such a view, given that it was not organised by anarcho-syndicalist employees of the Royal Festival Hall, but by Maria Beddoes and Paul Khera, a duet of sentimental graphic designers who, as students, had been inspired by punk to cast aside their airbrushes and set squares in revolutionary ferment: 'This is *The Evening Standard*. This is *Fiesta*. This is a pair of scissors. Now form an advertising Consultancy.'

'The idea that you can still go out and do what you want is coming back at last', says Ben Kelly sleeve designer for Godley & Creme, A Certain Ratio, and The Cure among others. 'I still count myself as one of the lucky generation', fortuitously suggesting that some 'punk' designers were luckier than others.[6] If anything, the cult of the individual designer was reinforced by punk's 'version of the credo *quia absurdum est*: you don't like it but you do it anyway; you get used to it and you even like it in the end.'[7] Copyright, an issue previously of little interest to graphic designers, became *the* hot topic, (battles continue to take place over the attribution of many Pistols graphics.) Who was the best designer outlaw; who was the least individual? Generating such contradictions, of course, was the whole point. However, given its pedigree, is it still possible to relish the 'irony' of such ambivalence? Adopting a visual vocabulary and style which was entertaining, yet acidly absurd, Reid famously recorded attempts to erase the Pistols from cultural history (**Never Mind the Bans**, 1977), before interminably representing their demise in posters and merchandising, much of which is represented in *Destroy*. Yet Reid's fear that 'the posters would end up as decor for trendy lefties' bedroom walls'[8], was misplaced, for this is one of many times in which they have found their legitimate home in a vinyl sleeved cube, the art-gallery-as-record-fair; legitimate since, according to Reid's version of punk, assaulting the pop scene head on, simply gave the Pistols a lot of publicity, enabling them to make 'Cash out of Chaos'. Khera has an analogous incongruous fable: 'The Pistols were playing on a boat across the river and were banned from coming ashore by the police. We knew that the show would get more of a reaction here and it seems an ironic venue because of punk hating royalty.'[9] One end product of this version of events is Saatchi art. Literally. **New Labour, New Danger** (1996) saw Reid's Readers'-Wives style letterbox eyes and rip-off-style-ripped-off by the Right. To complicate matters, New Labour themselves appear to have heeded McLaren's 10 lessons in how to mask reaction in the cloak of youth and revolt.

Like New Labour, *Destroy* is also about what it excludes, reminding us that cultural history results from a suppression of possibilities. It would have been interesting to have seen Genesis P-Orridge's **Paranoia Club** business cards here ('E know you don't write back because you hate us'), or perhaps a few posters such as **Gainsbourgh's Blue Movie Boy**, and **Gary Gilmore Memorial Society**. It seems unfortunate to have missed such an opportunity to have presented Throbbing Gristle's proto-punk work as COUM Transmissions, much of which has far greater appeal than Reid's numerous homages to the Motherfuckers. Unlike many punks who were relatively new to such matters, TG/COUM had been practicing for seven years as performance artists. They had also spent a great deal of time developing punk's deliberately offensive fascination with murderers and criminals, although in this, they were far from alone.[10] TG were particularly adept at arousing an extreme response, leaving people in a dialectical position where they could not switch the situation off as a joke. Many of their record sleeves which are on display, on first inspection seem bland, a banal photograph of an everyday location, but to the initiated the spot is the scene of a crime, usually a rape or grisly murder. Representing the shock effects of sex crime, thought designer Peter 'Sleazy' Christopherson, would provide an effective route to challenge the hegemony of the mass-media's manipulative sensationalism. With a heady mix of urban decay and accounts of the last murder and subsequent apprehension of the Moors Murders,[11] TG pushed sado-masochistic performance to its limits: "Is it only legality that prevents the artist from slaughter of human beings as performance? ... Ian Brady and Myra Hindley photographed landscapes on the Moors in England where they had buried chil-

dren after sexually assaulting and killing them. Landscapes that only have meaning when perceived through their eyes. Art is perception of the moment. Action. Conscious. Brady as a conceptual performer? ...What separates crime from art action? Is crime just unsophisticated or 'naive' performance art? Structurally Brady's photos, Hindley's tapes, documentation."[12] This 'investigation' into the links between art, sex, prostitution and crime, provoked press malpractice and misinterpretation at a time when most of their short attention span was focused on the Pistols.[13] As a result, P-Orridge received a number of death threats. Satirically exposing the hypocrisy of this situation, *Death Threats* appeared as a track on **Dead on Arrival: The Third and Final Report of Throbbing Gristle** (1978). The record sleeve dryly alludes to child pornography, involvement with which P-Orridge was also being wrongly accused of at the time.

COUM's feud with the 'straight' artworld was clear, as P-Orridge encouraged the use of text as purely graphic, verbal abstraction, stating that: "In much contemporary art words are juxtaposed with images and photographs. I do the same in a small exchangeable format. (It amuses me to parody real world / art world)."[14] As for many punk designers, radical amateurism demanded a humorous assault on categorisation and intellectualisation. In many ways this served to challenge the pretensions of semiotic art and rectify the solicitous nature of educational photography by transforming them into humorous forms of insubordination. Early punk graphics derided the vogue for appending abstruse theoretical texts with fetishistic imagery: 'COUM have nothing to say and they're saying it. Make your own theory. COUM have no game to play and they're playing it.'[15]

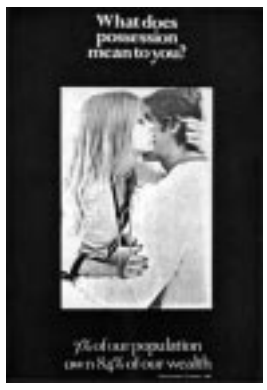
However, by maintaining a contradictory and absurd stance, much punk design refused to establish the wider contexts in which it might retain a critical stance or challenge viewers to shift the goalposts for themselves. The punk fascination with highly conventional textual and visual cues of crime stories and pornography tended to disallow the ability to manipulate words and images to suggest new meanings: 'To suggest that the prerogative of art is simply to touch on possibilities without comment surely shows an insufficient grasp of visual rhetoric. ...Surely he must see that no amount of manipulation of context can redeem the use of the [Auschwitz] gas-chamber logo; in purely artistic terms, which he cannot escape, there are such things as a sense of diminished responsibility and a law of diminishing returns.'[16] While the arbitrariness of verbal and visual language allowed for graphic artist's manipulation, their control over what was ultimately signified was tenuous at best. For better or worse, punk designers were unwilling to fully manipulate their audience's conclusions, that is, the artist's authority, once the work was in production, was ignored. Yet, even this much was never quite certain with TG. As a riposte to their tarnished image, TG appeared in Arran knit sweaters with Land Rover on an English coastal hillside for *20 Jazz-Funk Greats*, one of the highlights of *Destroy*.

Given that playing games is the major design concern here, the emphasis in design of the later '70s and early '80s shifts away from 'punk' bands, towards New Wave and New Romantic bands. From the point of view of designers in 1976, such designs would not be 'punk'. This, however, presupposes that punk graphic design was primarily a question of form. It may seem absurd today to think that punk imagery could still be valued for its 'subcultural' status, but it remains clear that it contributed more than a little to changing the social, economic and political topography of Britain. Nonetheless, for many in the late 1970s, regarding record sleeve designs as possible solutions to the problem of the artist's contribution to the perpetuation of an oppressive system, would have made them guilty of the egotism and elitism they deplored: 'If they did anything, they made a lot of people content with being nothing. They certainly didn't inspire the working classes.'[17] Such New Wave sensibilities therefore tend to dominate a great deal of the designs exhibited in *Destroy*.

In all, this seems to have been particularly pressing given that *Destroy* is the third in an annual series of exhibitions at the South Bank Centre entitled *Towards the Millennium*, each of which aim to capture the 'zeitgeist' of a decade through its art or design. Hence, we are are given the impression that, from 1978, a greater number of sleeve designs became more absolute, while others look like baroque creations fit to challenge the collection of souvenirs of art history that inspired them. In most cases, however, the carnivalesque and agitational side of punk seems to convert to an emphasis upon record-design-as-commodity. Given that many sleeve designers had quickly abandoned the anti-aesthetic, the emphasis on commodity fetishism was an ingenious means of ensuring that records did not loose their newly acquired art status.

The sleeves selected for the later section of the exhibition explore the ways in which designers sought to correlate style and function when both were in an indeterminate context, producing designs without being preoccupied with the appearance of making or effacing art. The ironic 'Industrial' style which had been initiated by TG in the lead up to the 'Winter of Discontent', was reformulated and taken literally by technological determinists such as Cabaret Voltaire, Brian Eno, and Ben Kelly. Ultra-elegant Industrial sleeves inspired a plethora of designers to lovingly refine the utopian aspirations of ubiquitous modernist schools of design. Drawing on Garrett's successful appropriation of International Constructivist styles, Peter Saville turned his back on felt-tip and photomontage, and injected a melodramatic sentiment of romantic disintegration into the late 1970s by highjacking modernist design for a new generation of 'pale boys' raised on Kraftwerk and Berlin Bowie. Saville elicited a busy abstract sublime, activated by an engaging tension between a mass-produced look and a painstakingly handworked feel to the finished products for Joy Division, New Order and The Durutti Column. The operative tone of Factory designs remained hopeful and visionary, but exuded a powerful lack of meaning and place, creating an look which was neither critical nor nostalgic, but *evolutionary*.

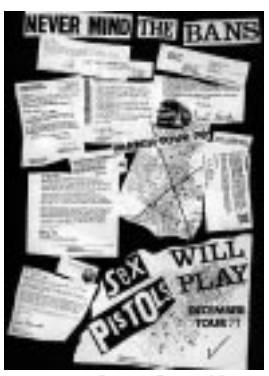
John Cooper Clarke *Snap, Crackle & Bop*



Burgin *Possession*

Prophetically, Peter York once regarded punk designers as a important guides to this new Leisure Class, a new moneyed class which rejected the academic values of the middle-classes, replacing the pedantic rationality of 'good taste' with 'a pluralism of pleasure.'[18] Certainly, Thatcher's emphasis on self-fulfillment, authenticity, and freedom of choice had an obvious appeal to participants in the sixties cultural revolution, many of whom were impresarios. Hence, in liberal post punk design, the consumer was king, driven by the desire to maximise pleasure. New Romantic design was a part of the raw, uncouth, socially, psychologically and sexually insecure new elite who were either unable or unwilling to attain the 'academic values' associated with Old Labour, values which had secured *some* members of the excluded a safe path to success since W.W.II. Such designers were set to take the lead in the corporate image-centred world of the 1980s. New Romantic sleeves openly celebrated the erasure of historical claims to knowledge made by the academic estate, while maligning of the nihilism and amateurism of Punk by re-establishing a perfectionist emphasis on image and 'product'. BOW WOW WOW's sources are absurdly eclectic. *See Jungle....* (1981, RCA), Nick Egan's translation of Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass*, made the pointed suggestion that style and content were both subservient to the vagaries of fashion, stirring up a superficiality that would often border on neurosis. Following a similar line of reasoning Steve Strange, ex-frontman of punk outfit The Moors Murderers, formed the 'collective studio project' *Visage* in 1979 with *Blitz* DJ Rusty Egan, Midge Ure and Billy Currie of Ultravox, and John McGeoch, Dave Formula and Barry Adamson from Magazine. Announcing it 'leisure time for the pleasure boys', they quickly found themselves invited to all the right cosmopolitan parties with rich high profile social termites so despised by punk, and henceforth became the music press' whipping boy. Robotic beats, banks of varied synthesisers, flattened vocals, and the message of terminally repeated choruses concealed the void between dead-end daily jobs and night time fantasies of The New Darlings of Decadence, who, deriding the conventionality of fashionable outrage, heralded the new order of posing: "New styles, New shapes / New modes, they're to roll my fashion tapes / Oh my visage / Visuals, magazines, reflex styles / Past, future, in extreme / Oh my visage."[19] Strange's desire to substantiate and enrich his own image by depicting his own body as the source of his style was quintessentially New Romantic. The 1982 retrospective album *The Anvil* (Polydor), named after New York's infamous leather 'n' bondage dive, was launched at Strange's very own Paris fashion show. The album cover saw Strange in a Luchino Visconti movie-still photographed by the master of soft porn and presentation incarnate, Helmut Newton. Inevitably, Saville was responsible for the ceremonial graphics.

Margaret Harrison *Rape*

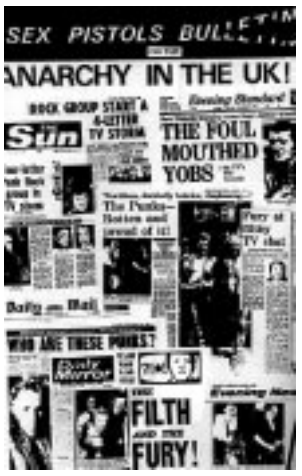


Jamie Reid *Never Mind the Bans*

Jamie Reid *Never Trust a Hippy*

Despite being responsible for the slick consumer packaging of Public Image LTD's Public Image (1978), the typewritten amateurism of punk fanzines such as **South London Stinks** (Anon. 1977) remained in the early issues of Terry Jones' **iD**. This magazine was quickly transformed into a market leader, as the editorial emphasis switched entirely to fashion, its punky credentials distancing it from advocates of the heinous 'graphix' style found in late '70s fashion journals such as *VIZ: Art, Photography, Fashion*. With Garrett occasionally helping out with design, *iD* succeeded to switch the British Fashion Press' emphasis away from prosaic interviews with 'Them' designers such Zandra Rhodes and the Logan Brothers. Instead was lucid reportage of the outrageous fashions being worn 'on the streets' and at venues such as *Blitz*, *St. Moritz*, *Hell*, *Le Kilt* and *Le Beetroot* where nightclubbers had been turning up as living works of art. Here was a sharp, timely contrast to the grubbiness of punk. Theatrical get ups; swashbuckling pirate clothing, Kabuki masks, make-up, and transvestites were all welcomed. There were sad Pierrot clowns, majorettes, toy soldiers, puritans and Carmen Mirandas. *VIZ* went into receivership, while Strange's Eighties Set took off. Following two entire editions of *The Face* (English for *Visage*) devoted to them,[20] The Now Crowd suddenly became an international movement, 'The Cult with No Name', with an article in *Time*, and lavish spreads in Continental magazines from *Stern* to *Vogue*.

Not all New Wave design was as slick and polished as the airbrushed glam that punk rebelled against; nor was it all obsessed with mannerism and the sound of commodities fucking. One direction was the theatrical engagement with 'class' taken in designs such as Barney Bubbles' numerous editions of Ian Dury and the Blockheads' *Do-It-Yourself* (1979, Stiff). Far from being alienated youths, Dury and the Blockheads were ex-art school students (Dury even taught at Canterbury and the RCA) and greatly accomplished musicians. Consequently, Bubbles, another punk designer who *had* been to art school, took this opportunity to make a humorous jibe at the affected amateurism of *de rigeur* DIY punk graphics, designing a number of sleeves which resembled school books covered in scraps of flock wallpaper from the early '70s. Similarly, John Cooper Clarke, once heralded as the New Wave George Formby, is a poet who, like Ian Dury, had been around for some time but only started to come into his own with the advent of the New Wave: 'You can look at things like Dada and Surrealism and reject it for being a middle-class phenomenon. I think people in the New Wave have done the smart thing and walked into those areas. Now you've got a kind of working class vision of things. I don't think I've ever seen a punk rock group that didn't have something very imaginative about it. It's not being a traitor to your class to go into those areas. It only widens your perspective.'[21] Saville's sleeve for *Snap, Crackle & Bop* (Epic, 1980) represents Clarke's trademark three-piece suit complete with tab collar, shades and JCC punky lapel badges. The 'pocket' comes with book of poetry styled like a Telephone Directory, the lyrics overlaid on pages listing the names Cooper or Clarke. With music handled by The Invisible Girls (experienced Mancunian hands Martin 'Zero' Hannett, Pete Shelley, Bill Nelson, and Vinni Reilly) the New Romantic stance as a parody of design, utilising theatrical breaks with 'straight' culture, was both pointedly mocked and cherished: "Don't doubt your own identity / Dress down to cool anonymity / The Pierre Cardin line to infinity / Clothes to climb in the meri-



Sex Pistols *Bulletin*


Steve Strange at Heroes, 1978

tocracy / The new age of benevolent bureaucracy."[22] The intellectualisation of youth subculture was one of many targets of Clarke's drollery: "Twin wheeled existentialists steeped in the sterile excrement of a doomed democracy 'oose post-Nietszchian sensibilities reject the bovine gregariousness of a senile oligarchy."[23]

While *Destroy* is warts and all—including ABC and Duran Duran—it would be unfair to say that the 'punk artifice' parable has been allowed to run unhindered. The curators, perhaps daunted at the number of previous attempts to analyse punk, have settled with displaying everything taxonometrically and in approximate chronological order. This modernist hang was not entirely a contemptible suppression of contingency, given that it gave scope for critical acknowledgment that cultural artifacts are the products of competing value-systems. Hovering in their transparent sleeves, 'punk' graphic designs are bracketed as open verdicts, allowing full criticism to run as the final, unwritten chapter. Visitors can examine stylistic shifts and provide monolithic theoretical justification for them, or openly consider the indeterminate relationships between the different factions involved without adopting the pretense that anything is capable of resolution. When beginning to consider if Reid's work has been juxtaposed with the first twelve felt-tip pen and typewriter script issues of Glasgow's version of *Sniffin' Glue* to emphasise or undermine Punk professionalism, tacit acknowledgment that the hang functions as a reminder that the culture of our age is one that is never finished. Since rules change in accordance with the needs of time and situational modalities, it would seem fair to say that exhibitions such as *Destroy* are one of a series of games played according to undetermined rules. The speculation never ends.

notes

1 John Cooper Clarke, 'Punk Rock Revival', Specially commissioned for *The List* in 1997.

2 Jamie Reid in Jon Savage, *Up They Rise: The Incomplete Works of Jamie Reid*, Faber & Faber, London, 1987, p55.

3 Minda, "Minda", in T. Dennett, D. Evans, S. Gohl, AND J. Spence, (eds.), *Photography / Politics: One*, Photography Workshop, London, September 1979, p125.

4 Peter York, "The Clone Zone (Night of the Living Dead)", *Style Wars*, Sidgewick & Jackson, London, 1980, p47.

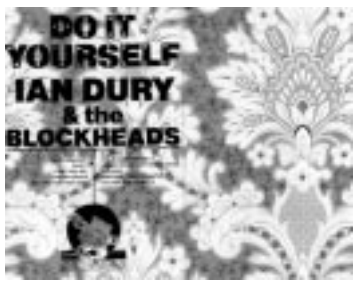
5 Malcolm Garrett, quoted in 'Graphics', *Creative Review*, February 1998, p37.

6 Ben Kelly quoted in Domenic Cavendish, 'The Great Rock & Roll Exhibition', *The Independent* (Style), 31st January—6th February, p5.

7 See footnote 10.

8 Jamie Reid in Jon Savage, *Up They Rise: The Incomplete Works of Jamie Reid*, Faber & Faber, London, 1987, p43.

9 Ben Khera quoted in *Attitude*, February 1998.



Barney Bubbles
Do It Yourself

10 'The passive nihilist compromises with his own lucidity about the collapse of all values. Bandwagon after bandwagon works out its own version of the credo *quia absurdum est*: you don't like it but you do it anyway; you get used to it and you even like it in the end. Passive nihilism is an overture to conformism. ...Between the two poles stretches a no-mans-land, the waste land of the solitary killer, of the criminal described so aptly by Bettina as the crime of the state. Jack the Ripper is essentially inaccessible. The mechanisms of hierarchical power cannot touch him; he cannot be touched by the revolutionary will.' RAOUL VANEIGEM, 'Desolation Row' (1967), translated in *King Mob Echo*, No. 1, April 1968, Pygmalion Press, London, p7.

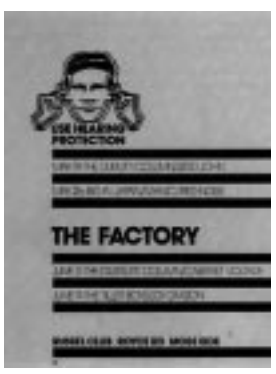
11 Throbbing Gristle, 'Introduction' (1.01), 'Very Friendly' (15.54), *Throbbing Gristle Live Volume One 1976-1978*, Mute.

12 Genesis P-Orridge and Peter Christopherson, 'Annihilating Reality', *Studio International*, July/August 1976, p44.

13 Tony Roinson, 'Moors Murder 'Art' Storm', *Sunday Mirror*, 15th August, 1976, p9.

14 Genesis P-Orridge, 'Statement by Genesis P-Orridge to his Solicitor April 5th 1976', *G.P.O. versus G.P-O: A Chronicle of Mail Art on Trial Coumpiled by Genesis P-Orridge*, Ecart, Switzerland, 1976.

15 COUM Transmissions, 'What Has COUM to Mean? : Thee Theory Behind COUM', Typewritten Statement, Undated, *COUM Transmissions/Throbbing Gristle* Archive, National Art Library, V&A, London, 1990.



The Factory
May/June 1978

16 Stuart Morgan, 'What the Papers Say', *Artscribe* 18, July 1979, p18-19.

17 Ian Birch, 'In The Beginning', *The Book With No Name*, Omnibus, London, 1981, p11.

18 Ian Chambers, 'Urban Soundscapes 1976-: The Paradoxes of Crisis', *Urban Rhythms: Pop Music and Popular Culture*, Macmillan, Hampshire, 1985, p199.

19 Visage, 'Visage'.

20 The Face, Nos. 7-8.

21 John Cooper Clarke, *New Musical Express*, January 28th, 1978.

22 John Cooper Clarke, 'Euro Communist / Gucci Socialist', *Ten Years in an Open Neck Shirt*, Arrow/Arena Books, 1983, p10.

23 John Cooper Clarke, Psycle Sluts, Part 1', *Disguise in Love*, Epic, 1978.