

Haroon Mirza: Regaining a degree of Control (2010)
British Art Show 7: Nottingham Contemporary
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A Sound Piece: Haroon Mirza's Post-Punk Sculpture

This is a text about Haroon Mirza's installation, 'Regaining a degree of Control' (2010) through the lens of Joy Division, and, a text about Joy Division through the lens of Haroon Mirza's installation, 'Regaining a degree of Control.' (2010)

Candidate

To differentiate between punk and post-punk, Tony Wilson, broadcaster and co-founder of Factory Records said that punk enabled you to say, 'Fuck you', but somehow it couldn't go any further than this singular phrase of anger. On the other hand he commented that post-punk, and the band Joy Division, were able to communicate much more than that and were able to explore more complex territory by saying, 'I'm fucked'. (Wilson,T, 2007) This difference, between a punk energy that seems more singularly set out to self destruct and a post-punk one that is a subtler, more reflexive, more complex mobilization of punks ideals, makes Haroon Mirza's piece, 'Regaining a degree of Control' (2010) candidate for a post-punk, rather than a punk, piece of sculpture.

Haroon Mirza is an artist who makes audio and visual compositions that are considered sculptural assemblages and installations. A Northern Art Prize 2010 nominee, Mirza's work for British Art Show 7, 'Regaining a degree of Control', (2010) incorporates numerous iconographic references to post-punk band Joy Division. 'Regaining a degree of Control', (2010) resembles a room where sound has already taken place. An old radio lies on its side, a wardrobe stands with a hole in it, turntables rotate on the run off groove and a television screen appears naked having been dismantled from its set. There is brokenness here but it is less destructive and more constructive, rather, things are broken (fucked) but have been carefully taken apart. Nothing appears to have been carelessly dropped nor have objects been subject to a violent smash. Objects have been deconstructed with the post-punk complexity that Wilson speaks of.

Occasionally sound happens, non invasive, ambient almost, implicating us in a listening and looking out for more sound. Hearing and not hearing, seeing and not seeing resonate on many levels in this work, a reverberation is happening in the reciprocal relationship between the works form and the works content. The contents, made up of ready-mades presented with little intervention, intervene with each other, make sense because they are presented in relation to and are therefore, in this room and this installation, related to one another.

I Remember Nothing

An inexpensive, common place, black woodchip wardrobe stands empty, and from its waist a bench and a tall slim speaker unit are connected and moulded. On it rests a rotating turntable, one of four in the work, this one holds Joy Divisions 1979 album 'Unknown Pleasures'. The vinyl turns as the arm buffers uselessly on the run off groove, looping over the static as if it were being pushed by a relentless tide, suggesting that the record has already been played before we arrived. Below it, a flat screen, apparently divorced from its television unit rests precariously on the face of a speaker; the acoustic grill cloth, like the television screen, is estranged from its protective cabinet and other mechanistic parts. On the screen an image flickers of Ian Curtis, lead singer of post-punk band Joy Division. Curtis is caught dancing each time a strobe light, situated behind the wardrobe, beams through a hole in the lower quarter of the units back panel.

Curtis goes unnoticed depending on when and how you look at him. Crouching down closer and timing it just right, the strobe hits the image from behind, and we are offered an advantageous perspective. The ephemeral quality of the image gives Curtis the impression of being holographic; spectral. The footage has a ghostly quality to it for many reasons, the fact that Curtis is dead and the digital process of capturing a body in the recording process, contribute to this ghostliness. In the documentary, 'Joy Division' (2007), Rob Dickinson, writer and journalist comments that 'Technology has turned us all into ghosts – echoes and reverbs – spaces, visual and audio media turning us into a datable object and they are killing us' (Dickinson, R, 2007). The spectral quality that Joy Divisions music has, or any music for

that matter, seems to have as much to do with it being the echo and reverb of any body, let alone the echo and reverb of Curtis' dead body.

Curtis' performances have been likened to the physicality of a seizure, and in this case the connections between art and life are conveniently, and devastatingly, close. Curtis, a sufferer of epilepsy, expelled a trance-like energy on stage, and here, the strobe light that enables us to see the image, also has the power to disable; capturing the body in an epileptic state. Hidden in the title of the work, 'Regaining a degree of Control', (2010), is a hint to the work's content and is itself an example of the complex intertextual nature of the many cultural references within the work. In the exhibition guide for this work it states, 'Curtis's song 'She's Lost Control' (1978) concerns a girl with epilepsy, a condition that Curtis himself suffered from and to which the strobe light in Mirza's installation refers.' (British Art Show 7, 2010) The title references this relationship implicitly, and as such the song itself, 'She's Lost Control' for those of us who know it, plays out silently in our heads. These instances of implied sound are a symbol of the work's restraint whereby it exercises its own degree of control.



Regaining a degree of Control (2010) Courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery

Shadowplay

An energy saving light bulb rotates sombrely, enabled and in sync with a second, empty turntable, the bulb hangs from the ceiling on a black power cable and rests on the turntable's edge. It traces a periphery and an invisible circle is drawn around a redundant speaker, seemingly teasing sound from it. The speaker, or rather the speaker cabinet, appears empty, without its innards, gutted and faceless without its fascia. Perhaps the speaker cloth that the Curtis, now contained in his screen rests on belongs to this and so, redundant, the speaker takes on a plinth-like function as the turntable is merely presented upon it.

A radio appears to emit a dull ache of a sound as it lies on a third turntable seated in the shadow of the broken speaker, all objects occupying the same table. As the radio rotates on

the turntable it is buzzing but with a flatness and monotony that could only come from an aged device. The radio is reacting to the bulb whereby sound happens and only happens because it is specifically a transistor radio. The uncanny contingency is that it must be a transistor radio for they buzz when they are in close proximity to an energy saving light bulb. (Mirza, H, 2011) The radio is old and although I am not sure exactly how old I know that it is dead media. The literal interference between the two references that they were not made to co-exist in the same space given that they are technologies born of different times, the transistor radio being mass produced in the 60's and 70's, the energy saving light bulb a product of the 80's. Despite their historical and technological dissidence, the two share salient points given that both were made to be energy efficient versions of their predecessors; the transistor radio a more energy efficient transmitter than the tube radio, the energy saving bulb, using 80 percent electricity than the standard. This dysfunctional relationship is transformed into a pleasing aesthetic and sonic confluence enabled by the proxemics of the installation.

Nearby, a portable DVD player sits on a small make-shift shelf screwed onto the back of the wardrobe. The make do and mend, DIY mentality of this sculptural detail references both a suggestion of domesticity and, exercises a punk/post-punk sensibility. Its methods are both skilled and unskilled, doing it yourself regardless of and sometimes in deliberate negation of having possessed the necessary skills required to 'do it well.' An audio visual tussle between the well-made and badly-made, the monumental and un-monumental, the skilled and unskilled clashes intelligently here in Mirza's post-punk installation. In the event of deliberately making the installations construction and deconstruction available to us, we see and hear the works formal and conceptual workings out.

The visible DVD is not spinning; yet on the screen we see footage of Mirza using two small objects to play notes on music editing software on his laptop. The footage has been saved and is played from a memory card and not the DVD. (Mirza, H, 2011) Things are not as they seem and we are pleasantly fooled in the incongruence. From the DVD a different sound occasionally emits, a low piano sound pulses repeatedly, baritone like Curtis' voice. It has

the pace and quality of a Hook baseline or a Morris drum part with the occasional interruption of a higher note that could be a suggestion of Summers lead guitar. Or, it could be none of these things, if it is a Joy Division track I can not place it and if it is not it is still well placed here, not least because the juxtaposition of analogue and digital media works so well in this installation. Again, a reference, intentional or not seems placed and I think of 'Digital' Joy Divisions track of 1978. I hear the closing lyrics, 'Fade away, fade away, Fade away, fade away' (Curtis, I, 1978, in Curtis, D, 1995, p.155) sung silently in my own memory and imagine them repeat to fade. Fade away, like Curtis, like analogue, like sound into silence.

The radio's presence indirectly refers to another Joy Division track, 'Transmission' (1978) and whether it is meant or not, this connection can not be denied when read in relation to so much other Joy Division iconography. Transmission is not transmitting but again, I hear the words ring on in silence, 'Radio, live transmission. Radio, live transmission, Listen to the silence, let it ring on.' (Curtis, I, 1978 in Curtis, D, 1995, p. 166)

A fourth and final turntable sits in the shadow of the wardrobe, underneath the makeshift bench and holds 'Closer', Joy Divisions second and final album, released in 1980. The vinyl has been raised off the surface of the platter and the needle has been positioned upside-down, effectively playing the record in reverse. There is tape on the record so, backwards, it eternally loops the end of the second last song on the album, 'The Eternal' (1980), not quite the end, but almost. (Mirza, H, 2011) The vinyl, suspended above the turntable makes the arm appear to be reaching the underside, operating as if it were upside down. The arm appears to be scratching below the surface of 'Closer', and as such becomes a metaphor for looking and listening closer. It seems no coincidence that 'Closer' crouches underneath the bench and mimics my earlier body posture as I too had crouched, had been drawn closer to the screen to catch the flickering images of Curtis.

A New Dawn Fades

Altogether, we have a family of objects, a portrait, a related vocabulary of things, sounds and histories. Their relations are complex, endlessly tessellating visually, thematically, formally and conceptually. Here, the furniture that holds the turntable that holds the record 'Unknown Pleasures' seems both of its time and not of its time, a generic, transportable, mass produced wardrobe that appears to be made out of medium density fibreboard. 'MDF' as it is most commonly known, became most popular in mass production at the turn of the 1980s', used then and still now in the production of cheap, domestic furniture, and so could belong equally to either decade. This trans-historical, transcendental detail seems important in this room; a late 70's room with post-punk tendencies, better placed for it being out of place in a 2010 gallery.

Even though the installations content points outside of itself to a musical legacy that has become for better or worse, wedded to a romantic spectre of the 70's, in 2010 this spectre still retains its reverence and currency. The dislocated quality that is located in all of Joy Divisions work, the sense that we are hearing something in the present that persistently pulls us back to the past, is manifested here in this sculptural installation; a hauntological, post-modern perspective that despite its pastness still has the forward pull of something uncannily prophetic.

I cannot escape the iconic and cultural significance of the chosen matter. Joy Divisions 'Unknown Pleasures' sits without playing any tracks, white noise emits every thirty seconds and therefore becomes an unknown pleasure, the pensive listener spectator sees a sound waiting, sitting smugly and denying us the pleasure of listening. This turns the action from the arm that touches it into an empty gesture; the grooves of the record that sit depressed are reduced to purely decorative lines. 'Closer' also sits and its weight of significance is born out of its being the record related to death. 'Closer' was released just as Ian Curtis, Joy Divisions lead singer was found dead and here is both its pleasure and its pain, making beautiful sense of tragedy. Reduced to white noise, and the occasional relative silence, sound truly becomes an object, the vinyl's themselves become art objects, regardless of

them being heard or not. A black vinyl circular space, an object made to play musical tracks, is left lying redundant yet the redundancy of this object is its art, is its point. Similarly, the shelves of the black woodchip wardrobe are empty and this seems no accident, they are full of emptiness as if all inhabitants had left. There is beauty in the uselessness of a wardrobe that has nothing left to hold.

For Curtis, the singer silenced in death, inaction became action. The apparent passivity's of the death of Curtis, of the un-heard 'Closer' and 'Unknown Pleasures' and, of the death of analogue media, are paradoxically their pull. In their death they seize us in an air of melancholy as we imagine what these records might have sounded and or could sound like. Fittingly, Mirza's sound installation asks us to listen to these silences, or as Peter Saville suggests of Joy Divisions work we exercise, 'The art of seeing things that are invisible' (Saville, P, 2003 in Morley, P, 2008, p.306). In this case we hear things that are not audible and just the suggestion of sound is enough and in some cases too much.

Interzone

In imagining sound we have an imaging and in this I invent an image of a room, a room for sound to happen, to reverberate and inhabit. Sounds place themselves, and in the arrangement of 'Regaining a degree of Control', the elements are compartmentalised, yet are also connected, by wires and cables, dangling like threads. It is obvious that the radio, the speakers, the DVD, the vinyl and the turntables are vehicles for sound, but, it can not be denied that the broken wardrobe and the other furniture are vehicles also. The hole that the wardrobe bares must have stirred noise as it was broken, and if we were to imagine sounds as things, then this arrangement could be a visual score, waiting to be played.

The wardrobe is both a potential instrument for sound and at the same time could be a sign or notation of sound. On a stave, or in a visual score, the wardrobe stands for a unit of sound instead of the established sign for a musical note, unconventional, untraditional, yet equally able to be played. I hear and see a temporal and spatial arrangement that is a choreography of sound objects and object sounds and of this almost synaesthetic correlation

Mirza comments 'I try and somehow mirror the visual with the acoustic' (Mirza, H, 2009) There is a mirroring here whereby sound becomes equivalent to a concrete object, sound operates as a sculptural form.

The installation, a physical manifestation of a sound, both asks and answers the question, what does a sound look like? Or, more specifically, what would the physical manifestation of a post-punk Joy Division track look like? Maybe Mirza's work does this and maybe it does not but for me this is what it is doing and it is doing it very well. As Tony Wilson, comments, 'As I understand it, every time you hear a sound, you don't know it but your brain is telling you where you are and where the sound is coming from according to the amount of reverb, delay and so on. It creates an imaginary room.' (Wilson, T, 2005, in Kennedy, J, 2006, p.59)

The room I see when I listen to 'Unknown Pleasures' and 'Closer' for that matter are not far from this one, a broken down, half empty, half domestic space. A room that has barely survived the sounds it has made.

Disorder

When Martin Hannett, Joy Divisions infamous producer, worked on 'Unknown Pleasures' he set about recording each instrument part individually. Compartmentalising each part meant that they could exist independently from each other, breaking up the noise into discreet elements so as to make sounds moveable. Legend has it that drummer Stephen Morris was instructed to play his drum part on the roof outside of the studio in order to get the right acoustics. This reminds us that the type of sound produced is always in relation to the architectural properties of the room that it reverberates in and thus, invisible sound is always connected to something more solid; the walls. Sound escapes into thin air in a room without walls and so the architectural divisions that determine the acoustics take on a vital role in sculpting the sound. On the roof, Morris played but nobody was recording, becoming an 'unheard recording', as rare as finding some of Curtis's 'unseen footage' or 'unseen lyrics.' Annexed from the studio, this anecdote is a neat example of the dislocation that can be heard in Joy Divisions tracks. The sound, born out of a desire to express something of the

social dislocation perpetuated by Thatcher's Conservative government of the late 70's and 1980's, manifests itself in punk and post-punk sound whereby the elements are disenfranchised, but crucially, never disembodied. Here, sounds become like objects, like bodies to be arranged and re-arranged like furniture, shelving units and benches, drums and guitars. Of this technique it is said that, 'Hannett added and removed space, dropped in rumours of sound, amplified emptiness, created a hollowed out impression of volume and violence.' (Morley, P, 2008, p.17).

This technique of arrangement takes effect in Mirza's installation and it too produces hollowed out impressions of sound. This is suggested in the hole in the back of the hollow wardrobe, in the hollowed out, empty vessel speaker cabinets and in the hollow pressing of the grooves on the records. Mirza drops rumours of sound into these seemingly empty spaces, amplifying this emptiness as white noise or the sound of silence, making this more violent than noise itself.

These spaces between individual elements in the installation enable the aesthetics of the arrangement, the spaces edge and frame each object, complimenting each other by leaving just the right distances between them. The elements talk amongst themselves across those gaps, quite literally in the case of the transistor radio and the energy saving light bulb. The objects in this post-punk installation communicate their relationship to each other and to us with respectful distance, despite what we may have heard about punk and post-punk's confrontational over, and, undertones. These gaps are necessary as they contribute to the sense of brokenness, a functional disfunctionality that reinforces the many iconic references in the work; cultural, social and political. Mirza's and Joy Division's broken arrangements of disparate, discordant and dysfunctional elements are estranged and marooned, just like us, then and still now, and this is their strength.

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