

JOY DIVISIONS



## Curator's Statement

*... the silence of all painting, of all music, the silence of the form that neither signifies nor flattens, but that shows... the silence does nothing: it exposes everything... it is the tension of speech, the vibration that lets no meaning weigh down or weigh in... which nothing causes to be taken as anything other than what it is: the simple strangeness of presentation.*

Jean-Luc Nancy<sup>1</sup>

This exhibition does not propose meaning. It is a clearing that opens to the place of presentation; a place where we can discuss the thread connecting two Joy Divisions and what is at stake in them.

Late last year I gave several artists and writers a piece of text similar to the following:

### Joy Divisions

This exhibition, writing and outdoor listening party explore the band Joy Division and the Nazi sex slave camp of the same name.

Evidence suggests that between 1942 and 1945, Auschwitz and at least nine other Nazi concentration camps contained sex slave divisions. The 1955 novella *The House of Dolls* graphically depicts life in one of these divisions, called *Freudenabteilung* or *Joy Division*.

Over twenty years after the novella was first published, Bernard Sumner, keyboardist and guitarist of the Manchester band Warsaw, read parts of the book and changed the name of the band to Joy Division. While bassist Peter Hook and Sumner later admitted to being intrigued by fascism at the time, drummer Stephen Morris argued that accusations of neo-Nazi

sympathies merely provoked the band "to keep on doing it, because that's the kind of people we are." The post-punk visionaries played their first show as Joy Division on January 25th, 1978.

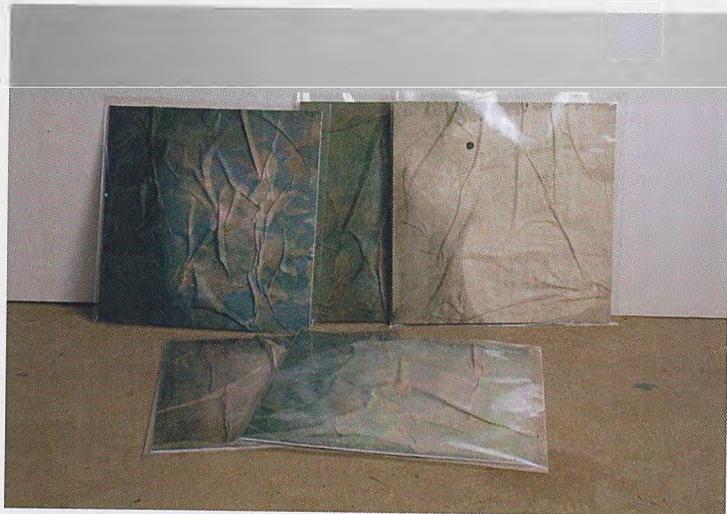
The works in the gallery and here in the catalogue are responses to that text. You will find thirteen visual responses and statements by the artists intermingled with seven essays that were written to acknowledge and expand our understanding of the text above.

Instead of presenting a detailed curator's note or a lengthy introduction, I have decided to add commentary throughout in order to follow the connecting thread of responses herein. This following, or this tracing, allows us to work together to present the two Joy Divisions and the impetus and repercussions of one, however disparate, entity borrowing from another.

Eva Ball  
May 2009

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, "Painting In the Grotto," *The Muses*, translated by Peggy Kamuf, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), p 7.



**Mark Harris** |

*FAC 23A #1-5*

*mixed media, installation variable*

2009

Joy Division has slipped in and out of my attention during the last 28 years. I moved down from Edinburgh to London in late summer of '79, leaving behind my intense focus on punk and its aftermath that had been easier to sustain in a smaller city. For a couple of years, London felt oversized, unencompassable, alienating, entrancing. There was too much that was new to allow older fascinations to survive, and my immediate community was focused on art rather than music. As well as starting graduate school, I shared a squat in Kings Cross whose responsible residents would spend the weekend fixing the house toilet. It was a long way from the party and club-community I'd enjoyed in Scotland. And I was getting older. One evening I was employed as security guard at a concert where Joy Division were supposed to be playing, though in the end other Manchester bands filled in. The night ended flat and unmemorable. I can't remember much of any of the concerts I attended in those three London years, although the Edinburgh gigs from '77-'79 are still incredibly vivid. I must have bought "Love Will Tear Us Apart" after the single started getting radio play. By then I was living in a South London council flat of my own, frequently surrounded by all-night reggae parties. The music I was listening to wasn't always my choice. "Love Will Tear Us Apart" felt very much up my street, however. Ian Curtis's melancholic poetry matched my own insecurities quite well and it stayed on the turntable, the only Joy Division vinyl I've ever owned.

These paintings are titled after that single: "FAC 23A (#1-5)." Without reproducing the text, they use exaggeratedly distressed surfaces to have a shot at evoking the stony monochrome cover that so perfectly matched the music's bleakness. The paintings are exactly 15" x 15" and come in their own plastic sleeves. They sit on the floor, against the wall, on a table or shelf, in any configuration that suggests someone's collection of albums or singles, casually left out.

*Curator's Notes*

*Over the past few years, I have taken no interest in thinking about the differences between painting and sculpture, or between punk and post-punk. But this work begs me to be honest. I like painting, but for my own work I favor sculpture. For me it engages the body--us--in our own space, forcing us to become part of the questioning provoked by the work. Painting usually speaks only to my hands or to my face; it fascinates my surfaces. It is the difference between having an emotion and being in a mood. Sculpture can create this being-in.*

*FAC 23A (#1-5) activates the Van Gallery in a way that only sculpture can. It is the first thing we see as we make our way up the three stairs, and turn the corner into the small hall that is the gallery. It encounters us at eye level and grabs hold of our gaze as we make our way up, eventually drawing our eyes down to the floor. It forces us to see the entire gallery and interpret it into a context, transforming us to become part of this context. We become part of a space and mood that is energized with the excitement of listening to records so intently and with such anticipation for the next song that the records are stacked and scattered on the floor as we rush to play the perfect joint. We are caught up in the excitement.*

*This excitement rings hollow though; despite the mood it has created, the paintings are sculpture and not records. The aggressive anticipation that was evoked by the form of the sculpture is replaced once we take a closer look and see the blackened colors and wrinkled surface of the sculpture. Closer inspection shows that there is no record and we are left with a feeling that something is missing, and all the power is immediately revoked. Punk supplied a sense of power inside a place of insecurity where frustrations with poverty and powerlessness were subverted with music that was aggressive and required little money and no training to produce. It was a way out of placement. Post-punk, deeply rooted in the same economics as its so-called predecessor, took the stance that FAC 23A (#1-5) takes. Post-punk created the same mood of excitement and power with driving drums and long intros, but then subverted that punk power, throwing in the towel to sing about the emptiness.*