

Mark Fisher Memorial Lecture 2021

NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

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6-8pm

Via Zoom

Register (Free) via [Eventbrite](#)

TEST DEPT

with Alexei Monroe and Peter Webb

TEST DEPT - <https://testdept.org.uk>

<https://www.facebook.com/TestDept.HQ/>

<https://testdept.bandcamp.com>

<https://www.olirecords.com/artist/testdept/>

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Mark Fisher Memorial Lecture 2021.

Test Dept with Alexei Monroe and Peter Webb

by The Department of Visual Cultures, Goldsmiths, University of London

Commentary by Alexei Monroe

“Test Dept were always more than a musical group. They are better understood as a popular modernist collective that had the production of sound at its centre, but which also made visuals, projections and films..... [Their] signature sound is intensely percussive, a convulsive dance music that took its inspiration from Soviet constructivism, but which became something like the British equivalent of the politicised us hip-hop group Public Enemy. The records are sonic mosaics, pulsing with panic. [They] were one of the last examples of post-punk”

Mark Fisher ‘Frieze’ 2015

Intro

The formation and early musical development of Test Dept from 1981 onwards cannot be separated from the political, social and economic landscape of London at that time, which acted as both a resource and cultural amplifier for the group. It arose as an idealistic scream of anger, emerging from the firebrand energy of punk, its nerve endings exposed, emanating a raw sense of ‘unfinished business’. It was born out of the crumbling inner cities and economically decimated ‘ghost towns’ of Britain, where the desolate boarded up high streets resembled the array of riot shields that first appeared in South London during the Brixton riots in 1981, known locally as ‘the uprising’.

Margaret Thatcher’s election in 1979 had been the catalyst for the introduction of ‘Reaganomics’, opening the floodgates to an untrammelled free market. It heralded a rampant ideological drive which had little concern for any human consequences as a result of its implementation. Thatcher herself proudly stated there was ‘no such thing as society’, polarising the population into hardened positions that offered no opportunity for consensus or compromise. Such moments developing were to become the key cultural signifiers in the forming social psyches of the fledgling Test Dept.

Extract from Noise: The Economy of Political Music / Total State Machine

Paul Jamrozy – Test Dept

DS30/Sailing the Industrial Styx

“The easy accusation to level at DS30 would be that it is an exercise in nostalgia. But it is best seen as a weaponisation of memories and archives, a mustering of resources for a struggle which could be resumed at any moment”

Mark Fisher ‘The Wire’ DS30 review 2014

An ex-industrial site is supposed to be mute. It should know its place in the symbolic order of sedative post-imperial heritage that Test Dept have always confronted. It should be picturesque, but not intrusive. It may retain a degree of eeriness, but this should not spill over

or become active. One of the problems affecting much so-called hauntological culture is precisely its coziness, even when applied to dark pasts. In short, too often hauntology isn't haunting. Or rather, is only safely, meekly haunting.

Yet a re-occupied, illuminated and amplified ruin, visible and audible at some distance is more alarming. *DS30* was a rebuke to the cultural stasis and retrospection Fisher diagnosed. The video featured hundreds of cold witnesses to the battles of the 1980s and how these haunt the present. Rather than burying them, it brought them back to life.

The sequence in which archive photos of mining sites gradually fade into the post-industrial landscapes is a good example of this. Viewed alone it could seem like an apolitical hauntological fetishisation, or even a celebration of the disappearance of heavy industry (regardless of the human cost). Yet because of the conceptual, aesthetic force and rigour of the whole, it avoids these traps. The film and the site were certainly suffused with mourning, but also with anger. Test Dept's militant(ly) modernist melancholy leaves space for grief and the tragic, but also strives to avoid being captured by them. Rather than simply aestheticizing ruins, they agitate and galvanise them. Not ruinporn but ruinprop, which transforms sites of inaction to sites of action. Here, like the historical Russian avant-garde, they suggested how art and action can be united, without diluting the power of either.

Creekside

The proliferation of squats and thriving housing co-operatives in South London encouraged a disparate group of the socially disaffected and mostly unemployed to set up base in New Cross. Here they integrated with local students from Goldsmiths College, completing Test Dept's first membership. This enabled free access to multi-media resources and created a burgeoning support network and fan base. It was also here, at the edge of the decaying docklands along the Thames, that Test Dept first uncovered its creative inspiration. Their rough excavations tapped into a latent energy, releasing an increasingly relentless sonic battery, which years later became the driving force behind the expansive multidisciplinary collective titled *The Ministry of Power*.

The regenerators of bust and boom undertook pitiless gentrification programmes on the edges of the industrial hinterlands, driving out established populations while grasping new fortunes into the bargain. Simultaneously, Test Dept, as self-styled recyclers, looked to sift and re-construct the debris. New sound possibilities were sculpted, creating a living instrument of change, a sonic war machine wired into the unrest of the times.

In Deptford's Creekside, bordering the ancient base of Maritime Greenwich, lay the residue of the 'glorious' imperial past: rusting hunks of industrial machinery shimmering in the heat of spring sunshine. Amidst the towering cranes and mechanical claws sweeping through the mountains of metal, the group swarmed and scavenged among the detritus, inspecting and testing the resonant sonic qualities of the waste products of a declining industrial era.

Extract from *Noise: The Economy of Political Music / Total State Machine* – Paul Jamroz

Debris/Environment

Ruin and dereliction are also a form of official history. Allowing a site to rot is a slow motion form of historical erasure. A site like Beckton Gas Works was a decaying monument to the labour of those who had worked there (and also to those killed in wartime bombing). Yet closure can silence such personal and collective histories, as well as the actual sounds of labour and machinery. 40 years ago, the group began to challenge this process in real time, learning how to occupy and to *play* ex-industrial spaces, how to utilise the acoustic properties of concrete, steel, iron and eventually increasingly vast buildings. As fast as monetarism shut down sites, they scavenged and began to plan how to re-animate them. The debris lying around could be honed and forged into defiant new uses, as could the buildings themselves.

Test Dept represent a mode of corrective cultural force, and one of the strongest expressions of this was the conscription of ruins and former industrial spaces as site of corrective memory. This mode of memorialisation is rigorous rather than resigned and fights rather than celebrates the erasure of memory. Their interventions in such spaces challenged the narratives that declare when a space and its workers are useful and useless. The temporary artistic re-occupation and re-animation of increasingly vast spaces, whether still used, in a ruin state, or scheduled for destruction, can spur audiences to remember not just the specific histories of a building, but its wider physical and sonic environment, enriching the space and the memory of the space.

40 years on, who will control the coming wave of *ruins-to-be* that the crisis will create? And who will make them resonate and how?

'There wasn't any of the usual iconic rock imagery; it wasn't people faking it with guitars looking wasted. It was about getting your act together, taking what was around you and making something of it, taking a positive political stance. That's an approach I connected with. I grew up in a war zone in Africa and I was quite disenchanted with a lot of the negative attitudes I found in London. There was something very positive about TD, particularly as it was being done by people without much in the way of resources. There's a parallel with Russian constructivism: taking things from the real world and making something out of those elements.'

Extract from The Revolutionary Camera / Total State Machine – Brett Turnbull – Test Dept visual director

Shoulder to Shoulder/The Collective: East

"I want to say how important it was for me to be with the band expressing myself. TD gave me this facility... It was my opportunity to resist, a voice to counter that media crush, resilience, resistance..."

Extract from Shoulder to Shoulder / Total State Machine

Alan Sutcliffe (Kent National Union of Mineworkers)

When “the collective” is invoked, many are alarmed. They consider what they might lose individually, rather than gain collectively. From the outside, the façade of Test Dept’s militant collectivism can seem daunting. In many ways this was necessary – much of its impact derived from having a fearsomely regimented image, which succeeded all too well in intimidating state authorities, as the surveillance they were subject to revealed. The image of Test Dept’s total machine wasn’t a romanticised form of the collective, but a forcefully functional and efficient one, especially as it clashed so vigorously with the privatising ethos of the time.

In 1981 very few people imagined the levels of personalised commodification we see in the instagrammed Big Brother era, when we’ve all become products and the unspoken command is to constantly reveal as much of yourself as possible. Test Dept’s collectivism was a rebuke in advance to the Americanised selfie culture we’re now consumed by. Perhaps we can draw inspiration from the refusal to share or to perform degrading emotional labour for corporations or social media audiences.

Yet their work is not emotionless or heartless. Nor do they refuse all emotional labour. Instead, they focus productive emotions: anger, resolve and militant melancholy. The collective was also always more flexible than it may seem, allowing for tactical alliances and productive meeting of minds rather than demanding the total orthodoxy that their image once suggested.

There are few directly personal stories in their work and *Total State Machine* was rare example of the group speaking openly of their own biographies. While these definitely played into the group’s work, they never become the subject of the work itself.

By processing and depersonalising emotions they make them more collectively resonant. In 2021 they remain dissidents, subverting the emotional economy through collective resolve, setting out a model of focused effective labour that refuses conscription into shallowness.

In the 80s they wielded the spectre of the utopian collective not just against the predatory Thatcherite state, but in the dysfunctional contexts of “actually existing socialism.” It may be that their Eastern Bloc experiences of clandestine performances, militarised border crossings and police harassment are going to become very grimly relevant as we experience the accelerating failures of “actually existing imperialist revivalism.” We may face shortages of goods and compassion, but we will not face shortages of historical parallels and useful lessons from the past.

European Network Tour

One of the ironies of the *European Network* tour in 1985, which went through East and West Europe, was that, regardless of the colour of the local political system, there was exactly the same high level of police interest. We were trailed, documented and harassed in every country we went into. It was like being in a strange state of siege. We were in a hand-painted 1960s

Seddon coach, carrying a ton and a half of scrap metal in the back, a bunch of shaved heads and flat tops in the front with a Charles Manson lookalike at the driving wheel wearing a Spitfire pilot's hat; so perhaps we did look a bit unusual. That level of attraction began to break down some of the ideas that the west represented total freedom and the east is all repression. the state apparatus is used to survey and keep a very close eye on whoever was deemed 'The Enemy Within'. We didn't even attempt to play in East Germany which was deeply repressive and in Czechoslovakia the concert organisers could have easily ended up spending a couple of years in prison. It was a very paranoid time and shows how brave the people were who tried to make things

happen, they were taking a lot of personal risks. In Hungary the authorities did try and intimidate people but by that stage no-one took them too seriously. the police did detain and interrogate for low-level information; Vince (from Art Deco) said that when we were travelling in Budapest there was almost certainly a police informer among the group of people partying with us on the bus.

Extract from European Network / Total State Machine – Angus Farquhar

Large scale/site specific/location responsive/strategies.

It's not only the materials or sounds of a location that can be useful and expressive. Its histories interact with and enhance the history of a group's site-specific engagements, even if these come to light long after the intervention. Here it's important to remember an older meaning of 'engagement' that predates its use in so-called 'international art speak'. What's relevant here is the martial sense: 'engagement' not just with a difficult or even hostile location, but with those forces who that dictated its histories.

Modern historical precedents for Test Dept's work such as Constructivism are well known, but there are other far older connections. In their early years, the decaying industry of Deptford was a key source of material and bleak inspiration. Yet besides its industrial history, the area has a strategic, political one. The old Deptford Bridge was the site of two highly significant struggles. In 1381, Wat Tyler led his rebels into London across it. It was also here that in 1497 Cornish rebels, led by a figure known as *An Gof* battled an overwhelming royal force originally intended to fight in Scotland.

So the group gathered their sonic arsenal and began their campaign in a historic battlefield area strongly associated with the struggle against English royal power. Like so many others, these uprisings were crushed but remain in the historical record (despite the indifference or hostility of councils in London and Cornwall). They form part of an alternate lineage of resistance, moments when the "powers that be" met defiant opposition.

Our Finest Hour

Our Finest Hour at Expo '86 in Vancouver was a suicidal career move, when it came to any hope of future arts funding. But it was an opportunity not to be missed, having the eyes of the world on us for 'Britain Day', especially knowing that Thatcher herself would be visiting the Expo site that day. we had a scary phone call from the Central Office of Information in London just before travelling, warning us "not to sink the Mothership" or something to that effect. That was like a red rag to a

bull. On the plane to Vancouver I sketched a stage set inspired by the poster for Battleship Potemkin. Tom Dixon was out there to weld some giant instruments for the band, and as if by fate, the local scrapyard was full of old ships. With Myra Davies' help we hijacked the British military band from the Royal Lancashire Regiment, who had no idea they were marching straight into the beginning of our show, as part of a fake flag-raising ceremony. This featured the Expo flag being taken down and our mop logo being raised at the entrance to the arena. Our Britain Day show began, TD thrashing out angry rhythms on rusty gun turrets with sledge-hammers to images of Thatcher's Falklands victory parade with idiotic crowds waving Union Jacks, intercut with Maggie's beaming face. There was a barrage of tabloid headlines celebrating the sinking of the Belgrano – Argy Bargy – Up Your Junta! classified film footage of British missile testing was used for *Kick to Kill*; Poynter's *Horsemen of the Apocalypse* sculptures were seen ushering in the end of the British Empire; cut-up newsreel footage of mounted police charging "The Enemy Within" at Orgreave; a brilliant black British bugle, Gene 'Scotty' Muir, who'd recently left the army due to institutional racism; and striking miner Alan Sutcliffe, wrapped naked in a blanket, reciting Bobby Sands' IRA hunger strike poem *I Fought A Monster Today*. Definitely a good night out!

Extract from *Our Finest Hour / Total State Machine* – Brett Turnbull

In the light of this history and their 1988/89 co-operation with another defiant Celtic force - *Brith Gof* - Test Dept appear as inheritors and protagonists of this lasting legacy. *Gododdin* was first staged in the already-doomed former Rover Car Factory outside Cardiff. The vast space was erased not long after the project temporarily resurrected it for a final battle, symbolically connecting two narratives the Thatcherite state was keen to downplay or erase – the Celtic and the industrial.

This powerful form of transgressive, weaponised monumentalism tried to compete with and even to overshadow actual state and corporate rituals. From the mid 80s they increasingly worked with orchestral and choral elements, augmenting their sonic power and just as their work was orchestrated, they orchestrated the sites they occupied. The buildings needed to be played and sonically re-animated in a convincing way that left no room for doubt about the group's efficiency. The sounds were not only monumental, but could function as sonic monuments in themselves.

They unnerved the state because they *looked and sounded like they meant business* and being able to produce convincing work in this type of space was a key part of that. It was also unnerving and challenging because it could compete aesthetically and symbolically, partly by using the neo-imperialist symbolism of the Thatcherite state. Visual examples of this include the use of the military band at Expo 86, clips of the Falklands War and victory celebrations (as seen in their 1988 TV collaboration with Steve Martland, *Albion*), and the use of massed drummers and pipers, a technique that reached a dramatic climax in Glasgow in 1990.

Test Dept's monumentalism could and *can continue to have* powerful effects, disrupting the symbolic order, compelling audiences to re-consider their stances and perhaps inspiring future struggles. Perhaps it is possible to accept that monumentalism from below is not a virtue in itself, but it can definitely have virtuous effects.

Programmed for Realism and Programming for Progress

*“The soft sweet sound of sedation
Sold with a chorus of tears
Culture stripped bare of emotion
And stamped with religion of fear”*

Sweet Sedation – Test Dept

Like Fisher, Test Dept tried to map and to combat what they called the “sweet sedation” of the market. Now, in an era of industrial-scale, algorithmic self-sedation, the repressed demand for means to cast off sedation continues to seep through cultural and media filtering systems. There is a hunger for what the group now calls “industrial agitation”. One issue we’re currently confronted by is the over-production of bloodless, nostalgic simulacra of 1980s styles such as industrial music. Test Dept stand out as historical pioneers, but also because even their newest work remains full-blooded, fuelled by sweat and toil. This trace of the real makes it stand out, but – just as in the 80s – also guarantees that it will be partly overlooked.

The book “Total State Machine”, which Fisher reviewed, was self-authorized and self-built, released by an independent publisher. It didn’t go through “the usual channels” and if it had been allowed through, could not have done so without some degree of tempering or decontamination to make it more palatable. Yet the price of refusing to make the usual compromises can be isolation.

Assembly of Disturbance Manifesto

Test Dept return to the Kapital
inviting an assemblage of collaborators,
to engage the popular imagination
in spectacular involvement.
Antipathy countered by the tactile.
A catalyst of noise,
infiltrating the airwaves with raw static.
An act of disturbance to combat a state of mediocrity,
a screaming voice in the face of apathy.
United in an alliance of rhythmic communication,
against the disintegration of the social
into a perpetually tracked and monitored culture.
Looking to the revolutionary base of the senses,
resounding profusely in the body,
a greater musical collectivity
searching its deepest resonance.
The senses re-engaged
in a resistance to the retreat
into the straitjacket of the secure

Following the Expo 86 action, which no British publication ever reported on, and which I wasn't aware of until I began work on the book, the group noticed that British coverage of them dried up for some time. The situation now isn't radically different. What limited coverage their activities have received has been in a narrow range of "alternative" outlets such as FACT or The Quietus and one isolated appearance on Radio 3.

Beyond the existence of the book, which was scarcely reviewed, they remain peripheral and beyond the confines of music and subcultural history, are not really canonical. Besides the collaboration with AV Festival in Gateshead, their only other artistic presence in recent years was in a Leipzig exhibition space run by former East German underground activists. Test Dept remain largely "beyond the pale" of the wider art establishment, even those parts of it that claim to be supporters of radical causes.

A statement of Fisher's gives some clues as to why this might be. In 2016 he lamented:

"... there's almost a deliberate removal of affect in many pieces of contemporary art now: what makes it art is that you don't feel anything in relation to it. We're encouraged to feel that we're Neanderthals if we still think that art should create feelings and affects, that it should have aesthetic texture, content, etc.—that's not sophisticated. Lots of tendencies in the contemporary art world are exactly against those things. But I'm happy to be Neanderthal if that's the case, to be honest."

This artistic holding back operates in negative synergy with the "exhaustion of the future" that Fisher diagnosed, along with its associated depressive, inhibiting effects. Given the state of things, depressive nihilism and fatalism are tempting options for many. Knowledge of the apparent exhaustion of the future can itself be exhausting. In these conditions, the lure of romantic decline and affecting nostalgia can be very seductive. Yet rather than fetishising it, should we perhaps try to *work through* the exhaustion, as the group once did for hour after hour in a Dickensian New Cross basement?

*"The future is here, the past rules the present
Are we witness to the triumph of capitalism?"*

*The financial meltdown, corporate master
The race to the bottom is getting faster*

*Media coercion with a bankrupt ideology
The blind obedience to a broken authority*

*Hard choices, hard times
Poverty is a crime,. Austerity is a lie
Truth deficit. Its payback time*

*Hard choices, hard times
Kleptocratic by design. Austerity is a lie
Crime and punishment time"*

Speak Truth To Power – Test Dept

If you want a paradigmatic example of art and music that refused to collaborate in this “removal of affect”, even before affectless-ness became an orthodoxy, Test Dept would surely be it. Sound man Jack Balchin remembers how seeing them in action “broke through a depressed core in me.” This is an example of the galvanising effects produced by working through the exhaustion. Perhaps hope needs to be worked for and at, to be produced and re-produced by constant rehearsal, repetition and exercise (mental as well as physical) ... or through metaphorical or literal drilling. Could this be one way to re-forge or re-galvanise new futures? Even when the concept of utopia has been extensively privatised and trivialised?

The shockwaves of post-imperial collapse - which both Fisher and Test Dept anticipated - are finally reaching the archaic Westminster structure and the survival of the current state structure is openly questioned. Besides a proliferation of ruins, we'll face a proliferation of debris of all sorts. Once again, entire industries may be scrapped and entire districts may experience the type of devastation that inner cities and mining areas did in the 1980s. Even the most recently gentrified parts of the cities may be much more vulnerable than they imagine to the scale of destruction. Massive sedation and disinformation will be deployed to shore up the façade, but how well can these work when rather than the slow, insidious cancellation of the future Fisher described, individuals are faced with the brutal, overnight cancellation of their futures? There may be no alternative but to forage amidst the literal and metaphorical wreckage, gathering scrap, testing it out and seeing how it can be made to resonate and to agitate. “Fuel to fight” may still be found amongst the falling masonry and toxic waste of British democracy.

