Punk Rock!! So What? – Negotiating an Exhibition of Punk Art and Design

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Abstract

Punk graphic design ranges from the raw and untrained outpourings of teenage rebels to the construction of sophisticated new visual approaches at the hands of active punk participants with a degree of technical training or skill. At the same time, it encompasses the branding of successful punk and new wave artists and the mass-marketing of commercial products by professional agents within the mainstream music industry. Punk's global history of more than forty years further complicates attempts to produce any kind of accurate, concise historical narrative. This chapter explores some of the problems in curating an exhibition of punk art and design, particularly in attempting to reflect the historical and contemporary diversity of a living subculture that continues to elude a simple – or singular – definition.

Punk Rock!! So What?

Fig.01 *Punk Rock!! So What?* exhibition identity (Russ Bestley 2015)

In the lead up to the Punk Scholars Network Conference and Postgraduate Symposium, *Punk NOW!!*, at Birmingham City University in October 2015, I was given the opportunity to curate an exhibition of punk graphic design and artwork in the BCU Parkside Gallery. The space is quite large, operating as a gallery all year round, with a number of wall and window spaces to hang work, lots of open space, white walls, excellent lighting and dedicated gallery technicians to help with installation. As such, it presented a fantastic opportunity to try to do something substantial and meaningful, to explore punk art and design beyond the stereotypical and clichéd.

Punk's diaspora was also not limited to the UK or US, and parallel developments were happening around the globe. What would become known as punk scenes had been developing in Australia, France, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Belgium and Scandinavia since the earliest days of a nascent UK punk movement, and even as punk in the UK reached its commercial peak and began to decline (at least in terms of its public profile), 'punk' was being discovered, invented or adapted in far-flung places below (Western) critical radar. There are now hundreds of variants of what might be termed 'punk' around the world, from as far afield as Eastern Europe to South America, South East Asia and the Himalayas, to the point that perhaps the catch-all term itself has become meaningless. Certainly there is evidence of a crossover of generations, with older punk bands still touring and producing records and newer participants evolving their own sounds and styles. Many contemporary punk concerts draw audiences from a wide range of ages

and backgrounds – in many ways it is surprising how long-lasting that initial burst of energy has endured, along with its sense of community, a term that appears alien at first glance to the history of the subculture.

The audience for the exhibition, entitled *Punk Rock!! So What?,* was to be quite wide-ranging. The gallery sits adjacent to the entrance of a university building, and the show was timed to span across the new academic year and the arrival of a new cohort of students. At the same time, it was public-facing, and a series of events were scheduled to bring in the wider community – some of whom, unsurprisingly, had longstanding personal connections to the punk subculture (and even, in some cases, a direct link to the work on display, as former band members, promoters, technicians or fans). The exhibition therefore needed to work on a number of levels – to function as an introduction to punk art and design for young students who may know little, if anything, of the history of the objects on display, while also offering some engaging insights for those already familiar and highlighting some of the contradictions and complexities of punk's visual history.

I had experience with the design of similar exhibitions – my PhD, *Hitsville UK: Punk and Graphic Design in the Faraway Towns, 1976-84*, completed in 2007, had led to a series of exhibitions in Southampton, London and Leeds, and I had designed smaller installations in Blackpool, Oxford and Newcastle. However, those exhibitions had focussed on a narrower theme – the design of UK punk and post-punk record covers within a limited timeframe, or work associated with a particular punk sub-genre, such as anarcho-punk or new wave and post-punk. By contrast, the brief for this exhibition was to reflect a range of punk-related visual material (record covers, posters, flyers, photographs, ephemera) from across the previous forty years, to show some of the breadth and diversity of punk art and design, and to offer the viewer a chance to reflect on connections, themes, repeated motifs or stylistic tropes and conventions. I also hoped to present some contradictions, to offer some open questions and less-travelled historical narratives. Obviously, that is an ambitious aim within a relatively small exhibition, but the selection of material for inclusion, and the juxtaposition of what might be termed sometimes uncomfortable bedfellows, was an attempt to open up debate with both the informed and less familiar viewer.

There have been other exhibitions of punk art and design, along with punk memorabilia, photographs, records, clothing and other ephemera in recent years, including some centred on the *Punk London* 40th Anniversary of Punk commemorations in 2016 – notably at the ICA, British Library and Design Museum. However, many of these exhibitions – such as *Loud Flash: British*

Punk on Paper and *Jubilee 2012 – Sixty Punk Singles*, both selected from the Mott Collection[1] – lacked a coherent curatorial voice or key narrative beyond the display of a personal or archive collection. Johan Kugelberg and Jon Savage's *'Someday All the Adults Will Die': Punk Graphics 1971- 1984*, at the Hayward Gallery, London, coinciding with the publication of their book *Punk: An Aesthetic*, at least arranged content in broadly thematic groups, though its underlying narrative was very self-contained and exclusive, centring on a narrow and limited timeline of punk history.

<mark>Fig.03 Typology: *No More Heroes: The First Wave of UK Punk* (detail)</mark>

<mark>Fig.04 Punk clothing advertisement, *New Musical Express*, July 1978</mark>

<mark>Fig.05 Typology: *All the Young Punks: UK Punk Diaspora*</mark>

Punk history is by its very nature messy and complicated. Following its emergence in the UK, USA and Europe in the 1970s, the subculture spread widely. As punk and new wave gained commercial and critical success, together with an attractive notoriety, it began an ongoing journey around the globe – both as a product and as an ideology. More than forty years after the US proto-punk progenitors of Detroit and New York unconsciously launched an underground revolution, and after untold premature obituaries, punk – in terms of music, philosophy, and identity – remains in rude health. Punk scenes continue to thrive as far afield as Russia, South America, India, China, Japan, the Middle East and Indonesia – 2011 saw the first official Saudi Arabian punk record release, while other scenes have established their mark in Madagascar, Algeria, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, even Tibet and the Himalayas. Nearer to home, an underground punk scene never actually went away and continues to 'mutate and survive'– with actions ranging from continued support for longstanding and established bands and scenes to the network of small-scale gigs, fanzines, music distribution, social and political activities of a truly cross-generational subculture. The *Punk Rock!! So What?* exhibition, then, aimed to include a range of material spanning the past forty years, demonstrating connections, stylistic conventions, patterns of engagement and the evolution of punk's visual language and identity across diverse regions and cultures.

As I gathered together suitable material for inclusion, largely from my own collection of records, posters and memorabilia, other opportunities became apparent, and I began to think of ways to

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[1] *Loud Flash: British Punk on Paper*, MUSAC, Museo de Arts Contemporáneo de Castilla y Leon, Spain 2010, Haunch of Venison, London 2010, Honor Fraser, Los Angeles 2011. *Jubilee 2012 – Sixty Punk Singles*, The Vinyl Factory, London, 30 May to 24 June 2012. *Someday All the Adults Will Die': Punk Graphics 1971 – 1984*, Hayward Gallery, London, 14 September to 4 November 2012.

contrast certain subtexts in the work: *do-it-yourself* against the professionally designed and manufactured object, the old and the new, local and global, stereotypes of punk politics or 'philosophy' and their counterpoints. I wanted to embrace the complexity of punk history, to question received 'facts', and to offer the viewer a few clues to other avenues they may wish to explore further.

Fig.06 Typology: *Xerox Music is Here at Last: DIY and the Post Punk Avant-Garde*

In some ways, this reflected the authorial position I had adopted for the book *The Art of Punk* (Omnibus 2012). Having been commissioned to write a book about 'punk posters', with the commissioning editor assuming that simply meant a few much-repeated images from the archive of the Sex Pistols and photographs of punks in London in 1976, I had adopted a rather contrary position, dedicating chapters to the Proto Punk scenes in New York, Detroit and London, early Punk formations in the US and Europe, New Wave and Post-Punk, Hardcore, Oi! and Street Punk, International Punk from Europe to South America, Japan, Africa, China and beyond, and a range of contemporary Punk, Hardcore and Post-Punk scenes around the globe. This was an attempt to show punk's complexity and diversity, to offer a more nuanced narrative to the reader, and to an extent to problematise a range of thematic 'punk' undercurrents, from notions of authenticity to creative autonomy, independence in the context of established commercial restraints, and the complexities of production, manufacture and distribution.

Fig.07 Posters: Suburban Studs, The Depressions (1978)

This led me to a practical problem. How should such an exhibition be constructed? The gallery manager had secured the use of eight large frames to display posters, and I decided to select a range of older punk material to go in these, though I also wanted to again emphasise material outside the usual frames of reference. Beside a poster designed by Jamie Reid for the Sex Pistols album *Never Mind The Bollocks*, I chose to show promotional posters for Crass, the Stranglers, Alternative TV, the Depressions, Killing Joke, the Beggars Banquet *Streets* album (the first UK compilation of independent punk recordings) and Suburban Studs. The latter suggested another interesting theme to develop – Suburban Studs were an early Birmingham punk band, and I decided to feature a few subtle hints to the viewer, reflecting on the location of the exhibition itself. A large black and white typographic poster for a gig by Siouxsie & the Banshees at Birmingham Mayfair (with support from the Human League and DIY punk duo Spizzoil, from Solihull on the outskirts of the city) was therefore an obvious choice, while other posters, flyers and record sleeves featuring Satans Rats, Neon Hearts, the Killjoys, Dangerous Girls, Swell Maps, GBH, Dead Wretched and Drongos For Europe were also chosen in part because of their connection to the local area.

I chose to extend one strategy utilised within the *Hitsville UK* exhibition, grouping together examples of seven-inch single picture sleeves in typologies based on punk sub-genre or location. These were produced as large digital prints on vinyl and attached to several of the walls in the gallery. Clusters reflected the early UK punk scene, the evolution of what would come to be termed New Wave, the UK punk 'diaspora' of lesser-known bands taking up the challenge in 1977-78, do-it-yourself and the post-punk avant-garde, anarcho-punk and a collection of US punk pioneers from the Ramones to Black Flag and Dead Kennedys.

In addition, a selection of seven-inch single sleeves and album covers were displayed in heavily ornate silver and black picture frames. This was in part an attempt to reflect the irony of showing punk record sleeves within an art gallery context, and a subtle piece of reflective satire on the status of punk graphic design.[2] Again, some of the examples were chosen to highlight contrasts and contradictions. 'Classic' album covers such as the first Damned album, *Damned Damned Damned*, designed by Barney Bubbles and featuring a photograph of the group by Peter Gravelle, and Jamie Reid's design for Sex Pistols' *Never Mind The Bollocks* were juxtaposed with Gee Vaucher's cover for the debut Crass EP, *The Feeding The Five Thousand*, a contemporary international punk compilation album *Underground Tajikistan: Dushanbe Punkers & Rockers* and a recent album release by Sheffield DIY punks Dry Heaves. The third XTC album, *Go2*, designed by Hipgnosis, was included for its clever and amusing use of self-referential copy writing, *"This is a Record Cover. This writing is the Design upon the record cover. The Design is to help Sell the record…"* once again highlighting the standard conventions and uses of the record-as-object, rather than as a work of 'art'.

The selection of twenty framed seven-inch single sleeves included the Drones, Johnny Moped, Rudi, Demob, the Exploited, Riot Squad, Chaos UK and others, together with a recent compilation EP of punk from Myanmar, while the 'local' area was again represented by Satans Rats, GBH, Dead Wretched and Drongos For Europe. Plastic Bertrand's 'Ça Plane Pour Moi'

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[2] Stuckist painter and Punk Scholars Network member Paul Harvey was asked at his PhD examination why he chose to display his paintings in elaborately carved, ornate frames. His response was that that was how he had always perceived 'art' to be displayed 'properly' in galleries and museums from a young age. I enjoyed the irony of applying the same rationale to a do-it-yourself album cover by the Nipple Erectors.

(1977), the Kids' 'No Monarchy' (1978) and Billy Childish's 'Punk Rock Enough For Me' (2015) reflected another attempt to present questions to the viewer regarding authenticity and an inclusive history of punk, as did the framed album cover of the Sex Pistols' *Some Product* album, with Jamie Reid's ironic, self-reflexive cover featuring a range of mock Sex Pistols punk 'products'.

Fig.11 Framed punk singles 1977-1981

The gallery windows also offered the opportunity to produce some large format hanging banners. These featured a selection of posters, along with examples of punk clothing advertisements from the music press of the late 1970s. As with the other parts of the exhibition, I wanted to show some contrasts – between the "do-it-yourself" and "anti-capitalist" stereotypes of punk lore and the commercial aspects of a fashion and music-centred popular subculture.

Fig.12 *Punk Rock!! So What?* window banners

In a similar manner, a wall of cheap, photocopied, black and white gig flyers reflected the DIY traditions of the hardcore punk movement alongside the contemporary punk underground. Some of this material was sourced from an archive of early US punk and hardcore flyers (circa 1980-85), while contemporary gig flyers produced by Andrew Morgan of Viral Age Records, Nottingham, UK provided both a contrast and a sense of visual continuum when juxtaposed with material from more than thirty years earlier. Photographs of the audience at the Rebellion Punk Festival, Blackpool by Sarah Dryden made an ironic comment on punk nostalgia and belonging, while Beth Kane's documentary shots of local punks added another dimension to the exhibition.

Fig.13 Punk clothing advertisement, *New Musical Express*, November 1977

Fig.14 *Punk Rock!! So What?* Flyer Wall (detail)

The relationship between punk's do-it-yourself philosophy and the music industry, along with fashion suppliers, designers, publishers and other commercial enterprises, became another central theme within the exhibition. Early punk graphics reflected the raw and unpolished nature of the music – the much-repeated philosophy that 'anyone can do it' led to an explosion of new punk design that was simple, brutal and awkward, but effective, encapsulated beautifully in Tony Moon's oft-cited *Playin' in the band* image from *Sideburns* fanzine, January 1977.[3] *Do it*

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[3] Usually described as the "three chords diagram", Moon's simple, hand-drawn illustration states *"This is a chord. This is another. This is a third. Now form a band."*

yourself was something of an ideal to aspire to, rather than an everyday reality, as the means of (re)production for anything more complex than a fanzine (record pressing, sleeve or poster printing) meant dealing with professional service providers. Artwork could be created by untrained designers, but print reproduction was often left to the services of a professional print studio – 'doing-it-yourself' had obvious limitations when it came to mass production and distribution (Bestley 2018). At the same time, punk's impact on the music industry allowed established labels and professional designers to invest in the subculture and to lead the way in terms of a developing punk aesthetic.

One story that does emerge quite clearly from this exhibition centres on the shift in punk visual styles in parallel with its commercialisation (and subsequent financial investment from the music industry) through to the gradual decline of the subculture – at least in terms of public awareness and mainstream profitability, though not participation, which continues unabated through international networks and collaborations. Punk's visual language seems to have come full circle, from the initial simplicity of anonymous, lo-tech, handmade graphics, through the hugely influential work[4] of designers such as Barney Bubbles, Jamie Reid, Arturo Vega, Chris Morton, George 'God' Snow, Jo Mirowski, Malcolm Garrett, Linder Sterling, Gee Vaucher, Peter Saville, Bob Last, Bill Smith, Jill Furmanovsky, Michael Beal, Jill Mumford, Winston Smith, Jello Biafra, Raymond Pettibon, Brian "Pushead" Schroeder, Mad Marc Rude, Shawn Kerri, Phil Smee, Russell Mills, Mike Coles and Savage Pencil to a genuinely DIY contemporary punk underground facilitated once again by often uncredited and anonymous artists and designers.

Punk Rock!! So What? was, then, an attempt to show a broad and inclusive selection of punk art and design from the past forty years, and to embrace some of the contradictions within simplistic narratives often presented as punk 'history'. The do-it-yourself, home-made and hand-made was presented alongside the polished and professional. Political punk sat next to apolitical, the serious beside the humorous, the independent in contrast with the commercial, and the 'authentic' along with some of those that have been marginalised by an ever-narrowing punk canon. This wasn't an attempt to repeat accepted norms, nor was it a direct refutation of well-worn punk definitions, but an invitation to engage with a more open (and, perhaps, honest) discussion on punk art and design, and its visual legacy.

On Reflection

The curation of a successful exhibition requires a clear sense of the message or narrative to be conveyed to visitors. Each panel within the *Punk Rock!! So What?* exhibition centred on a

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[4] In punk graphic design terms at least. It can be argued that most punk graphic design had little if any influence on the mainstream graphic design profession, although the later work of Malcolm Garrett, Neville Brody, Russell Mills and Rob O'Connor in music graphics, typography, magazine design, branding, advertising, television and even fashion would go on to help shape the new visual styles of the 1980s.

smaller story: from local punk history to global punk aesthetics and *do-it-yourself* in relation to the design profession and music industry. These stories then linked together as the viewer navigated the space to – hopefully – offer a sense of the diversity and complexity of punk's historical trajectory, impact, legacy and corresponding forms of visual communication, ranging from *do-it-yourself* flyers, record sleeves and graphic ephemera to professionally designed and produced commercial artefacts. In the end, this approach was at least partially successful, though perhaps an exhibition of visual artefacts without an extended accompanying written (or spoken) narrative would always be at least a little problematic. Links, or disparities, between objects sometimes required further explanation to the unfamiliar viewer, and the distinctions offered by time or geography – when placing a contemporary artefact from Asia next to a much older example from Europe or the US, for instance – could have been articulated more clearly through a stronger supporting narrative, rather than left to the viewer to discern. However, these may be minor quibbles in relation to the scope and breadth of the material displayed, the range of questions that arose from visitors and the broader discussion on punk politics, history and aesthetics generated in the process.

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Punk, aggressive form of rock music that coalesced into an international (though predominantly Anglo-American) movement in 1975â€"80. Often politicized and full of energy beneath a sarcastic, hostile facade, punk spread as an ideology and an aesthetic approach, becoming an archetype of teen rebellion and alienation.Â History at your fingertips. Sign up here to see what happened On This Day, every day in your inbox! Email address. By signing up, you agree to our Privacy Notice. Punk Art Arte Punk Rock Posters Band Posters Concert Posters Retro Posters Festival Posters Music Posters Cover Design. More information More like this. Gig Poster Collage Poster Concert Posters Punk Art Arte Punk Cover Design Art Design Album Design Photo Rock. DEVO, Blondie, Talking Heads, Klaus Nomi on â€˜20/20â€™ segment on New Wave, 1979. At DM we often poke fun at impossibly stiff or clueless news reporting on the music of the past, but sometimes you run across a piece of news coverage that is much better than it has any right to be.Â D.I.Y. typography and design at its finest, featuring Dead Kennedys, Fugazi, Minor Threat, Bad Brains, and The Cramps. Arte Punk Punk Art Punk Rock Les Aliens Punk Poster Riot Grrrl Art Graphique Post Punk Grafik Design. isisgallery.org | Jamie Reid Archive - Sale! Sale!Â Graphic Design Art E Design A Level Art Sketchbook Art Zine Punk Poster Collage Techniques Expressive Art Punk Art Art Graphique. Wooster Collective: Faile in Shanghai. tiger translate in shanghai 2006. Iron Maiden Punk Rock The Beatles Estilo Cholo Arte Punk Punk Art Sid And Nancy Johnny Rotten 70s Punk. Photo: Dennis Morris.Â "What so Nancy So Great" - Sid Vicious. Graphic Art Graphic Design Illustration Art Illustrations Punk Art Urban Art Zine Art Pictures Collage Art. 'Equipment Provided' By Charlie Anderson. The exhibition begins with punkâ€™s influences, many of which are queer, like John Waters, Divine, Candy Darling, and others in Warholâ€™s milieu. What was the influence of queer culture on punk? I wanted to be able to connect everything back to Andy Warhol and David Bowie. If you read all the history, especially of British punk, they all worshipped Bowie and androgyny in general. Similarly, Warhol did exciting things with the Velvet Underground and their intersection with the queer and trans community in the 1960s, with songs like â€œVenus in Fursâ€ or â€œCandy Says.â€ It would be completely revelatory Some featured artists include Emek, Shepard Fairey, Dave Leamon, Raymond Pettibon and Mark Vallen. The exhibit runs un...Â us that The Kantor Gallery in Los Angeles is hosting a new exhibition entitled "The Art of Punk" which features posters, album art, books and over 800 flyers from the punk scene. Some featured artists include Emek, Shepard Fairey, Dave Leamon, Raymond Pettibon and Mark Vallen. The exhibit runs until March 22nd. For more info and some pictures go here . 9. Previous Story. Wayne Kramer / Mother Superior 7 Inch: Design The Cover. Next Story. More CodeName: Rocky dates w/VGS, Toasters, Big D, Ska Summit. We were unable to load Disqus. If you are a moderator please see our troubleshooting guide . t