

**Exhibition Review: PUNK: Chaos to Couture**

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

May 9, 2013 – August 14, 2013

Curated by Andrew Bolton

*Image 1:* Gallery view, 430 Kings Road Period Room, Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013

Last the summer, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's high-profile exhibition *Punk: Chaos to Couture* offered seven galleries of Punk and Punk-inspired clothing. Much to the chagrin of some commentators, it approached Punk not as a political protest or musical genre but as a fashion movement. This is, to some extent, historically accurate. For all the talk of working-class street protest and authenticity, it was a clothes shop that served as a springboard for the Punk explosion. That shop was Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood's legendary West London boutique SEX, later renamed Seditonaries. The exhibition actually included a mock-up of Seditonaries in Gallery 3, the '430 Kings Road Period Room,' with original Seditonaries pieces hanging from the reproduction store fittings. Before it was SEX, Westwood and McLaren's store was named 'Let it Rock' and sold Teddy Boy styles that had not changed since the 1950s. As the store moved away from this static and codified style, it helped create a new style: Punk.

If fashion is indeed a form of art, then Westwood and McLaren's creations certainly belonged in an art museum such as the Met. The Seditonaries pieces on display in the first three galleries contained elements of Dadaism, Surrealism and Modernism, while their use of pastiche and ironic take on previous subcultural looks prefigured Postmodern art and theory. There was a wealth of Seditonaries garments in the reproduction of the Kings Road boutique, while the second gallery, 'Clothes for Heroes,' displayed a number of iconic Seditonaries shirts such as the *God Save the Queen Shirt*, *Two Cowboys Shirt* and *Anarchist Punk Gang – the 1%ers*. Having been widely worn at the time, these works will be familiar to anyone who has looked at photographs or films of the original Punk era. It was a treat to see these rare, often-bootlegged and highly-sought after artefacts up close.

*Image 2:* Gallery view, facsimile of CBGB bathroom, New York, 1975, Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013

The wall text in the introductory gallery explained how McLaren drew inspiration from the style of the New York CBGB's scene and from musician Richard Hell in particular. A wonderfully playful reproduction of the filthy, graffiti-covered CBGB's toilet paid homage to this scene, but there were no examples of the sorts of outfits that would have been worn there. While the exhibition emphasised the fact that the do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos of customisation was the essence of Punk fashion, it did not offer any examples of customised clothing. So while Punk fashion was evidently about much more than just Seditonaries, no other original Punk garments were displayed. Like Richard Hell, the original Punks assembled their look from existing subcultural styles, altering garments they already owned. From the Skinheads came Doc Marten boots, from the Teddy Boys came drainpipe trousers and so on.<sup>1</sup> This is what Postmodernists would refer to as 'pastiche.' For some, a change of haircut and a Punk badge was all that it took to 'look' Punk. For others, Punk was a more theatrical and de-constructionist affair involving acts of customisation such as stencilling slogans on clothes, ripping apart school blazers and wearing bin bags. The exhibition gave no examples of these 'everyday' Punk looks and it seemed somewhat ironic that the four galleries themed around DIY, not a single one featured a garment customised by its owner.

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Many former and current Punks have bemoaned the Met's appropriation of what they see as an authentic street culture, but this criticism misses the point. As Simon Frith and Howard Horne masterfully demonstrate in their book *Art into Pop*, Punk has existed at the intersection of art school ideals and commercial aspirations since its inception.<sup>2</sup> Fashion and commerce have always been a part of Punk. The problem with the exhibition is not that it reduces Punk to fashion or sanitizes it for a museum audience. The problem is that it interprets Punk fashion too narrowly, focusing entirely on the influence of Seditonaries. Westwood's own seamless transition into high fashion allowed the exhibition to slip smoothly into the more high-concept world of runway fashion as visitors made their way from the first three galleries into the final four.

**Image 3:** Gallery view, D.I.Y.: Destroy, Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013

While the exhibition may have fallen short on the 'Chaos' part, it did an excellent job on 'to Couture.' The remaining four galleries were dedicated to Punk-inspired works from the realm of high fashion. This actually began in the second gallery, where alongside the Seditonaries garments were contemporary interpretations of the same look, including a 2013 Burberry ensemble featuring a spiked leather motorcycle jacket matching spiked sandals. Christophe Decarnin's 2011 ensemble for House of Balmain was notable for the fact that it looked like it could have been from the 1970s until one noticed the use of silver, crystals and embroidery. It was upon entering the fourth gallery, 'DIY: Hardware,' that the distance, both chronological and aesthetic, between 2013 and 1977 became evident. This gallery's theme was hardware, displaying designer ensembles that took inspiration from Punk's use of spikes, studs, and zippers. Here the use of Punk elements was more pastiche than homage. For example, a 1994 black Versace silk dress featured gold safety pins. Riccardo Tisci's 2009-2010 ensemble for Givenchy was also fairly removed from Punk aesthetics. It was comprised of a black military-style cashmere jacket decorated with oversized gold studs and paired with black satin bell-bottoms. Christopher Kane's black lace dress with its straps and brass rings making it look like a cross between lingerie and a Victorian maid's costume, gestured to Punk's use of fetish gear and subversion of the male gaze.

The next gallery was themed around 'DIY: Bricolage,' and while the wall text quoted cultural studies scholar Dick Hebdige famous work on Punk, gallery 4 did not display the cut-up and bricolage of previous subcultural looks that Hebdige was referring to. Rather, this gallery featured the patchwork re-use of materials not originally intended to be worn. The curators saw parallels with Punk fashion's use of lavatory chains, bin bags and the like, describing the luxury fashion brands' clothes in this gallery as a sort of self-reflexive commentary on the disposability of consumer culture. Consumer detritus was incorporated into garments, with a Prada 2007 skirt and a 2004 Helmut Long jacket both using pressed bottle tops. Almost modernist in its clean lines and utilitarian design was Hussein Chalayan striking dress made out of white Tyvek airmail envelopes. Meanwhile, Galliano's 2001 jacket and skirt ensemble constructed of newsprint-patterned cotton and Scotch tape invoked the cut-and-paste aesthetic of DIY Punk picture sleeves, posters and fanzines.

The sixth gallery was dedicated to 'DIY: Graffiti & Agitprop,' focusing on the aesthetic of Punk sloganeering. The inspiration was Punk band The Clash's early look of paint-spattered, stencilled boiler suits, which were designed by Caroline Coon. Katherine Hammett's 1984 *58% DON'T WANT PERSHING* dress was among the more iconic dresses in this room, featuring a style that has been imitated widely. Maison Martin Margiela's 2009 *THERE IS MORE ACTION TO BE DONE TO FIGHT AIDS THAN TO WEAR THIS T-SHIRT BUT IT'S A GOOD START* looked like it would not have been out of place at Seditonaries. Westwood's 2013 *CLIMATE REVOLUTION* shirt, with its visual quoting of posters from the May '68 Paris uprising, was very much in keeping with her earlier work.

**Image 4:** Gallery view, D.I.Y.: Hardware, Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013

The final gallery, 'DIY: Destroy' was themed around deconstruction. It was inspired by Punk's use of ripped and torn clothing, interpreted as a symbol of anger and urban decay. Many of the garments in this room were simply torn or exhibited a patina, which did not strike this reviewer as particularly 'Punk', as Punks have never had a monopoly on the wearing of worn-in clothes. Much more interesting were the series of 2004-5 Rei Kawakubo Comme Des Garçons ensembles displayed in the middle of the room. Just as UK Post-Punk band Scritti Politti sang about Jacques Derrida, these works engaged with deconstruction in a more explicitly intellectual manner. Made of black silk and white cotton twill, with sleeves and ruffles in all the wrong places, these work highlighted the fact that the distinction between decoration and function is an artificial one constructed by the fashion discourse.

Aesthetically, the exhibition did an excellent job of delivering a cohesive experience. Wandering through the galleries created a sense of being in a self-contained space rather than in a wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The overlapping sound, video-projection, text and music were disorienting at times, but this was in keeping with the exhibition's playful engagement with Punk and Postmodernism. The walls of the gallery were host to numerous video installations, some directly connected to the garments on display, others more obliquely related. A wall of cathode-ray televisions hosted video collages, while other videos were projected directly onto the wall. Videos ranged from live performance to interviews to documentaries. Veteran fashion photographer Nick Knight assembled these video montages and acted as a creative consultant for the exhibition. The video clips vied for attention with speakers blaring interview clips and Punk rock classics such as Richard Hell and the Voidoids' 'Blank Generation' and X-Ray Spex's 'Identity'.

Given Punk's masculinist bias towards male performers and audiences, it was somewhat odd that the majority of the garments in the exhibition were women's. There were, however, a few exceptions. In the 'DIY: Hardware' gallery, there was a Thom Browne's 2013 wool jacket held together with safety pins, matched with a studded kilt and 21-hole brogues. In the 'DIY: Graffiti and Agitprop' gallery, two Galliano 2006-7 ensembles for Dior featured sequin-embroidered bursts of colour reminiscent of paint splashes or perhaps bullet holes. The lack of men's outfits can be attributed to the exhibition's emphasis on runway fashion, which remains disproportionately female. It is a shame that exhibition overlooked the Punk clothes worn in the clubs, pubs and streets before Punk hit the runways. After all, it was the creativity and self-expression inherent to Punk's DIY ethos that provided the inspiration for so many of the outfits on display in *Punk: Chaos to Couture*.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> Simon Frith and Howard Horne, *Art into Pop* (London: Methuen, 1987).

## Bibliography

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