

***Someday All the Adults will Die! Punk Graphics 1971–1984*, curated by Johan**

Kugelberg and John Savage, Hayward Gallery Project Space, Southbank Centre,

London, 14 September–4 November 2012

***Punk: An Aesthetic*, Johan Kugelberg and John Savage (eds), essays by William**

Gibson, Linder Sterling and Gee Vaucher (2012), New York: Rizzoli, 352 pp., ISBN

9780847836628, h/bk, £35.00

Reviewed by Nathaniel Weiner, York University (Canada)

The stark brutalism of London's Hayward Gallery provided an appropriate backdrop to 'Someday all the Adults Will Die! Punk Graphics 1971–1984', an exhibit hearkening back to the 'No Future' era. Coming at the tail end of a summer in which the capital saw not one, but two retrograde mass outpourings of national sentiment, *Someday all the Adults Will Die!* provided a visual palette-cleanser after this recent excess of commodified Brit-culture. Curated by Johan Kugelberg and Jon Savage to coincide with the publication of their book *Punk: an Aesthetic*, the exhibit gave visitors with a chance to view original copies of the flyers, posters, fanzines, record sleeves, T-shirts and other visual ephemera documented in the book.

A significant portion of the exhibit was given over to UK anarcho-punk band Crass, with a number of Gee Vaucher's stencils, fanzines and posters on display. The aesthetic totality presented by Crass, who were as much a political movement as a band, contrasted with the more piecemeal aesthetic of the rest of the exhibit. No one look or

style prevailed as the curators did an excellent job of coming to grips with punk's heterogeneity. Challenging the myopic popular narrative in which punk begins with the Sex Pistols and ends with New Romantic, the exhibit captured punk's cultural breadth and cultural depth. In the gallery's first room were items from the 1960s and early 1970s: a broad selection of agitprop posters, situationist pamphlets, rock fanzines and pub-rock posters. At the other end of the exhibit's periodization was American hardcore, incorporated with the inclusion of the Void/Faith split, Chronic Sick's 'Cutest Band in Hardcore EP' and some of Ray Pettibon's artwork.

One of the genre's most esoteric and obscure offshoots, UK DIY, was also well represented. This subgenre's do-it-yourself 7" sleeves and cassettes served to illustrate the degree to which punk's aesthetic was determined by material processes and constraints. The sign next to the wall of UK DIY 45s described how the Desperate Bicycle's 'Smokescreen' EP instigated the DIY movement, but for those unfamiliar with the band's itemizing of costs on record sleeves and rallying cry of 'it was easy, it was cheap, now go and do it!' this provided insufficient contextualization. Records featured here, like the Puritan Guitar's '£100 in 15 minutes' and the O Levels 'We Love Malcolm' EP, have found a new audience thanks to Hyped2Death's *Messthetics* compilations, but these CDs are only able reproduce the artwork at a fraction of original size. *Someday* allowed visitors to see these DIY works of art in all their minimalist glory.

There were also a great number of international records to be found in the exhibit: the Perfect Mother's 'You'll No So Wit' EP from Japan, the Mad Virgins 'I am a Computer' single from Belgium and the Metal Urbain 'Panik' single from France, just to name a few. This is not to say that *Someday* was only concerned with obscurities –

significant works by Jamie Reid and Vivienne Westwood featured prominently, as did many artefacts from the CBGBs scene. It was great to see Sex Pistols posters and the infamous 'Destroy' T-shirt in person, but what was special about *Someday all the Adults Will Die!* was how deeply it scratched beneath the surface. This was a refreshingly international and comprehensive take on punk, bringing the genre's periphery of under-documented provincial and international scenes to its (former) epicentre.

For those who were not able to make it to the exhibit, its contents and much more can be found in *Punk: An Aesthetic*. The book's scope is as broad as the exhibit's, although there is less of a focus on picture sleeves and more attention given to the early traces of punk within the 1960s counterculture and 1970s proto-punk scenes. Many of the items pictured here are a decade ahead of their time. Two Californian hippie posters in particular look as if they could have been found at the 100 Club, Vortex or Roxy. *Punk: an Aesthetic* takes as eclectic an approach to punk as the exhibit did, and for all its unearthing of the authentic, there are many amusing examples of punk's early commodification. Reproduced here are the covers of punk teenybopper magazines, pictures of punk soft porn and mail-order advertisements for ready-made punk outfits.

At the book's London launch (held at Rough Trade East), Savage explained that *Punk: an Aesthetic* was conceptualized as a visual companion to his authoritative book on punk, *England's Dreaming* (1991). Breaking from the London/New York axis early on, Savage was somewhat unique in the British music press with his championing of Los Angeles punk bands like the Weirdos, the Germs and the Screamers. Savage even travelled to Los Angeles to report on the city's punk scene for *Sounds*. It is fitting, then, that Gary Panter's portrait of the Screamers' Tomata du Plenty graces the cover of

Savage's new book. Savage's co-editor Johan Kugelberg has worked on projects similar to this one, documenting rock t-shirts, the early hip hop scene and Norwegian black metal. However, within punk collector circles he is much better-known for his role in compiling the first three *Killed by Death* LPs, records which inspired many more bootleg collections of punk rock rarities. He is also somewhat of a taste-maker, having written a number of well-respected record lists for *Ugly Things* fanzine, including the 'top 100 DIY records' and 'top 50 glam records'. With this background, Kugelberg brings the passion and expertise of a collector to his archival and curatorial work.

The opening night of the exhibit saw Kugelberg in conversation with author William Gibson, Crass artist Gee Vaucher, *Punk* magazine's Mike Holstrom and *Kill Your Pet Puppy* fanzine's John Holstrom at the Queen Elizabeth Hall. Each member of the panel had contributed to both the book and the exhibit from their personal collections and each had a unique perspective on punk. Yet their experiences were so disparate that there was little dialogue between them. The principal commonality between the panellists was their involvement in either the production or collection of fanzines, so it was disappointing that there was no discussion of the important role that fanzines played in punk's inception, especially in North America. Given the project's prominent inclusion of pre-punk fanzines by Bomp Records' Greg Shaw and the Dictators' Andy Shernoff, this felt like an oversight. This narrative is also absent from the book, which would have benefited from some discussion of how America's earliest punk band like Dictators, the Gizmos and Vom were connected by the fanzine underground that it documents. Also lacking is any critical analysis of the disjuncture between this colourful American aesthetic of hamburgers and rock'n'roll (best exemplified by Holstrom's *Punk*

magazine) and the grey, dystopian British aesthetic of tower blocks, disorder and decline (as seen in Savage's own *London's Outrage!* fanzine).

Critical analysis is not the book's strong suite; while the written contributions are illuminating, they are also quite short. While the book's cover refers to it as an essay, Vaucher's contribution is a preface of less than a page. Kugelberg's introduction, in which he reflects on the relationship between punk, nostalgia and collecting, does provide some contextualization and Savage's essay, in which he explores the artistic and avant-gardist tendencies within punk, is the stand-out contribution. The 'essays' in the post-script are as brief as the preface. With about a page each, William Gibson recalls his journey from the 1960s counterculture to punk and Linder Sterling describes how the Manchester punk scene inspired her collage art.

The brevity of these contributions does not detract from the book's overall impact, as what makes *Punk: An Aesthetic* unique is its visual narrative. The visual material it contains has been artfully selected by Kugelberg and Savage, and much of it has never been reproduced before. The design of this weighty coffee-table book also does it justice. While one might expect a book entitled *Punk: An Aesthetic* to articulate what, exactly, constitutes a 'punk aesthetic', the aesthetic disunity of these images resist the imposition of any definition. A certain internal coherence does emerge from this complexity, but it is more of a feeling than a clearly delineated visual style. That is to say: you may not be able to describe what looks 'punk', but you recognize it when you see it. Instead of categories or definitions, the book focuses on the means of production (letter-sets, typewriters, stencils, glue, scissors, craft knives, Xerox machines) and the

cheap, disposable nature of the finished product. The images in *Punk* do the talking, and the story that they tell is a remarkable one.

Kugelberg notes in his introduction that punk emerged out of the first wave of mass nostalgia to sweep western culture – the 1970s obsession with the 1950s. This nostalgia gave birth to the pop culture collector and shaped two of punk’s direct British antecedents, glam and pub rock. It is worth noting that at the same time in America, rock fanzines like *Who Put the Bomp?* were painstakingly cataloguing the music of the 1960s. It is what John Savage refers to as an ‘activist fan culture’. From this nostalgia came punk, a musical movement that is too often read as a radical break from the past. Punk would outlast all of its influences and three decades later, it retains its vitality and authenticity for culture’s malcontents.

As Kugelberg observes, it is often those who missed punk the first time around who approach it with the greatest fervour. He is amongst their ranks, as is this reviewer. This passion can find an outlet in collecting, but collecting is a solitary act that requires a great deal of fiscal and cultural capital. Producing bootleg compilations allows the collector to proselytize, but the LP jackets of these records fail to convey the visual impact of the punk 45s they compile. *Punk: an Aesthetic* communicates this visuality with a collector’s passion, democratizing access to artefacts that would otherwise have remained sequestered in lofts and basements. It does so as music becomes increasingly divorced from the materiality of record sleeves, labels, inserts, posters and fanzines. Another response to this immateriality has been the recent blossoming of punk reissues labels like Sing Sing Records, Last Laugh Records and 1977 Records. These labels’ vinyl reissues faithfully reproduce not just the sound but also the look of records by punk

also-rans like the Nasal Boys, the Tunnelrunners and the Toys. It is on the aesthetic front that contemporary punk bands often fall short, and the images documented in Savage and Kugelberg's book, along with the work of these reissue labels, highlight just how poorly today's computer-designed efforts compare. One hopes that just as the original punks plundered the 1950s and 1960s for inspiration, the sublimely shambolic (im)perfection of the ephemera documented in *Punk: An Aesthetic* will inspire a new generation of bedroom artists.

Contact:

E-mail: nweiner@yorku.ca