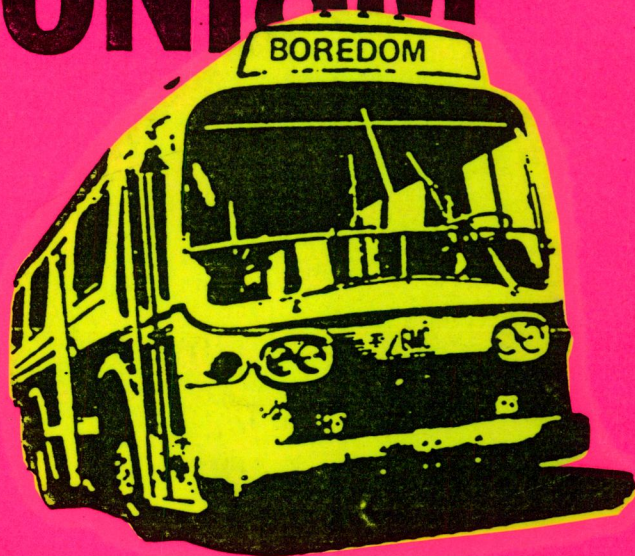
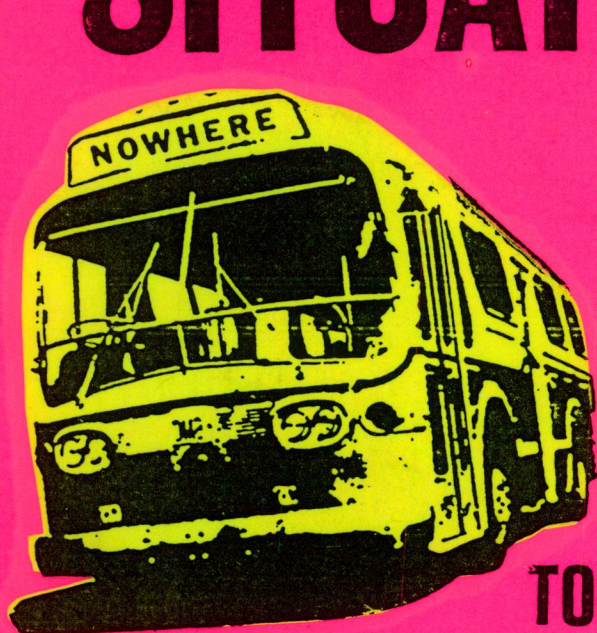


FROM
SITUATIONISM



TO THE
SEX PISTOLS:

THE SUBVERSION OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Niall Mc Cormack • Faculty of Design • Department of Industrial Design
1993





National College of Art & Design

Faculty of Design
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From Situationism to the Sex Pistols:
The Subversion of Everyday Life

by

Niall McCormack

Submitted to the Faculty of History of Art and
Design and Complementary Studies in Candidacy
for the Degree of B.des Industrial Design.

1993

A c k n o w l e d g e m e n t s

Many thanks to Paul O'Brien for helpful suggestions and assistance, and Stewart Home for responding to my queries.

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P r e f a c e

Due to the d.i.y. xeroxed nature of both Situationist and Punk graphics, many of the illustrations appear to be of 'poor' quality, this is due to the originals stark aesthetic rather than the reproduction process.

I n t r o d u c t i o n

Rejecting all morality and restraint, these cynics do not hesitate to commend theft, the destruction of scholarship, the abolition of work, total subversion and a world-wide proletarian revolution with 'unlicensed pleasure' as its only goal.

Summation of the judge,

Strasbourg, 1966.

(Situationist International, 1985, p4)

This true and dirty tale has been continuing throughout 200 years of Teenage Anarchy, and so today there still remains the Sex Pistols. Their active extremism is all they care about because that's what counts to jump right out of the 20th century as fast as you possibly can, in order to create an environment that you can truthfully run wild in.

Malcolm McLaren and Jamie Reid

for *The Great Rock 'n' Roll*

Swindle, 1979.

The punk phenomenon of 1977 was essentially a mass cultural manifestation of avant garde art, particularly Dada and its less-known legacy, Situationism. Punk, primarily through the Sex Pistols, represents the junction of the utopian avant garde art tradition and post-war youth subculture in Britain, and as such can be understood as a symptom of postmodern society.

Artist and writer Stewart Home claims that "the whole punk rock/Situationist connection was a fabrication of Dave and Stuart Wise and pushed in their pamphlet *The End of Music*." This thesis shall show that these links do exist and are not a fallacy propagated by *The End of Music*.

Through its effectiveness and its short-

fallings, punk illustrates how subcultures may be used as a medium through which 'artists' can fulfill their role, in a society where the existing "high art" hierarchy is outmoded. Punk rock is the first concrete sign that art can be superseded. It represents the culmination of the work started by Dada, and continued through the twentieth century by like-minded individuals, to integrate art into the life-praxis, closing the gap separating "art" from "reality".

This view of the punk phenomenon will be clarified and illustrated by defining Situationism as originated by the Lettrist International and practiced by the Situationist International. The concrete links between the Situationist International and the Sex Pistols will be established, as will the nature of the influence of the Situationist's methods and theory.

By analysing punk's origins and its passage to the status of subculture, the manipulation of the movement, by Malcolm McLaren in particular, may be assessed and quantified. The movement's origins may be compared and contrasted with that of previous subcultures, illustrating how the Sex Pistols instigated the punk aesthetic rather than adapting to it, and in so doing showing how punk also worked on the level of avant garde art.

The Sex Pistols implementing of the Situationists ideas and methods will be illustrated and evaluated using the group's activities, particularly the promotional campaign for the single *God Save the Queen*, as an example. The reaction to the Sex Pistols' actions and the snowballing of the punk movement exemplify the Situationists' belief in the superseding of art by the "creation of situations...concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organisation of a unitary ambience and a game of events". (Marcus, 1986, p85)

But the public's misinterpretation of punk's aims and motives and its shortlived nature,

highlighted the failings of the movement to sustain its vanguard pretensions at a mass culture level, and suggest a fundamental inability to merge art and life beyond the postmodern blurring of the distinction between high and low culture.

The punk phenomenon highlights the questions, whether it is possible to sustain a contrary position to 'dominant culture' within the hierarchy of that culture and if not, what the possible alternative methods of subverting the dominant culture are?

C h a p t e r O n e
DEMAND THE IMPOSSIBLE

YOUNG GUYS, YOUNG GIRLS,
Talent wanted for getting out of this and playing
No special requirements
Whether you're beautiful or you're bright
History could be on your side
WITH THE SITUATIONISTS.
No telephone. Write or turn up:
32, rue de la Montagne - Genevieve, Paris, 5e.

So read the last page of the first issue of *Internationale Situationiste* (1958). A call to action by the newly formed Situationist International, an alliance of European avant garde artists, architects and poets who between 1957 and 1969 provided a sharp critique of modern society and at its most influential helped spark the May '68 revolt in Paris, providing it with a voice through its graffiti slogans and pamphlets: NEVER WORK, BE REASONABLE -- DEMAND THE IMPOSSIBLE, INDULGE UNTRAMMELED DESIRE, UNDER THE PAVING STONES -- THE BEACH.

The Situationist International was formed in 1957 at a conference held in Cosio in Italy and attended by artists from a number of European countries, some of whom belonged to the almost unknown avant garde art movements established during the aftermath of the second world war, Cobra in northern Europe and Lettrism (later the Lettrist International) in Paris. Their express intention was to move art away from its position as a separate activity within society.

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from the Lettrists), Asger Jorn from Denmark and Constant Nieuwenhuys from Holland (both members of the by now defunct Cobra movement) novelist Alexander Trocchi from Glasgow, Artist Guiseppe Pinot - Galizio from Italy and Pravoslav Rada from Czechoslovakia.

The Situationist International published a sharp critique of modern society in its journal *Internationale Situationniste*, which ran to twelve issues between 1958 and 1969. Much of their thinking is based on Marx's theory of alienation and on the Dadaists' thoughts on the role art plays and should play in society, Lefebvre's theory of



Fig. 1
Poster for *International Situationist*

everyday life, and Ivan Chteheglov's *Formula for a New City*, written for the Lettrist International and containing the ideas which the SI would develop into unitary urbanism, a system of architecture

which the Situationists believed would revolutionise the way in which people relate to each other and their environment on a day to day basis.

The theories of the SI were most clearly expressed in Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* and Raoul Vaneigem's *Traite de savoir vivre a l'usage des jeunes generations* (Published in English as *The Revolution of Everyday Life*) both published in 1967 and intended as complimentary volumes.

The Situationists believed that all of life was now defined and pervaded by the 'spectacle' described as "a social relation among people, mediated by images." (Debord, 1977, para. 4). Debord's 'spectacular' theory stems from Marx's theory of alienated labour: "with the generalised separation of the worker and his products, every unitary view of accomplished activity and all direct personal communication among producers is lost" (Debord, 1977, para. 26). The worker not only feels alienated from what he or she produces but from all commodities and so the 'spectacle' also circumscribes leisure time. Leisure time is determined by one's working time, and as such it is as structured and restrictive as time spent working. Furthermore leisure time, in capitalist society, is the time in which one is obliged to partake of the commodities produced, through alienated labour during working time, thus alienated production turns to alienated consumption during leisure time. "None of the activity lost in labour can be regained in the submission to its results." (Debord, 1977, para. 27)

In 'spectacular' society "everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation" (Debord, 1977, para. 1) and so we see "the attraction of the unknown turned into mass tourism, adventure turned into scientific expeditions, and the taste for change turned into mere changes of taste" (Vaneigem, 1983, p199).

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The influence of the Situationists' theory of the 'spectacle' can be seen in Jean Baudrillard's early writings, particularly in his theory of the Simulacrum. Baudrillard states the four successive phases of the image to be:

- 1.It is the reflection of a basic reality.
- 2.It masks and perverts a basic reality.
- 3.It masks the absence of a basic reality.
- 4.It bears no relation to any reality whatever; it is its own pure simulacrum.(Baudrillard, 1988, p42)

The third phase of the image is the nature which the image adopts in spectacular society. The spectacle "is not a supplement to the real world. It is the heart of the unrealism of the real society." (Debord, 1977, para.6)

The Situationists believed that with the advances achieved in technology, the struggle for survival has been overcome. People's primary needs, food and shelter, could easily be catered for with existing technology. " This incessant expansion of economic power in the form of the commodity, cumulatively led to an abundance in which the primary question of survival is undoubtedly resolved " (Debord, 1977, para. 40). Under commodity capitalism the solution became the problem. As the primary needs are catered for new 'pseudo-needs' are created which must be satisfied by new commodities, thus the 'spectacle' must constantly perpetuate its own myth causing a state of what the Situationists termed "increased survival". Vaneigem describes the 'spectacle' as "a world in which the guarantee that we shall not die of starvation entails the risk of dying of boredom." (Vaneigem, 1983, p8)

The Situationists defined the 'proletariat' broadly as those who live according to 'cyclical time' - social time defined by production and consumption : "All people who have no possibility

of altering the social space-time that society allots for their consumption.” (Shipway, 1987, p163) It was this ‘class’ that the Situationists saw overthrowing ‘spectacular’ society, kept in place by “ those who organise this space-time, or who at least have a significant margin of personal choice” (Shipway, 1987, p163)

The 1966 disruptions at Strasbourg University and the factory occupations and strikes in France of 1968 were seen by the SI as the beginnings of the mass revolt against the ‘spectacle’ by this broadened proletariat.

While their theories were influenced by many sources, their actions were mainly a continuation of those instigated by the Lettrist International, chiefly *dérive*, psychogeography, *urbanisme unitaire* (integrated city - creation) *detournement*, play as creative activity, and a belief that art could create situations where people's everyday lives would be challenged and changed for good. (Savage, 1991, p31)

The SI's critique of city planning and architecture centred on their interest in the psychological effects of different environments. People's emotions, dreams and experiences are conditioned and controlled by the architecture and street scapes which they encounter throughout their daily routine. This influence of the surroundings on one's thinking, mood and actions was termed ‘psychogeography’ by the SI and they investigated this by means of the *dérive* or drift.

The *dérive* was defined by the Situationists as the “‘technique of locomotion without a goal’ in which ‘one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there.’” (Plant, 1992, p58)

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The SI concept of *dérive* was their interpretation of the practices of the Dadaists, Surrealists and Romantic poets.

The Situationists used the landscape of the city rather than the unconscious to practice surrealist automatism, immersing themselves in the geography of the city in an attempt to both understand the environments effects on them and to free themselves of the constraints of time and space placed on them by the society of the spectacle.

The influence of the Romantics' treatment of urbanism on the SI's 'psychogeography' is noted by Stewart Home. "Let the many attend to their daily affairs; the man of leisure can indulge in the perambulations of the *flâneur* only if as such he is already out of place. He is as much out of place in the atmosphere of complete leisure as in the feverish turmoil of the city" (Benjamin, 1986, p172). Benjamin's description of Baudelaire's *flâneur* matches perfectly the Situationists' description of those who *dérive*, outside of both production (work) and consumption (leisure). The Situationists regard the freedom from work and leisure as an end as well as a means of *dérive*.

The SI suggests the implementation of a system of architecture - 'unitary urbanism' - which would maximise the positive 'psychogeography' of the city causing a 'revolution of everyday life', inverting social relations. Unitary urbanism involves taking all the aspects which affect the 'space' of city environments and treating them as a whole - architecture, traffic control, pedestrian flow, parks and gardens, public transport, public spaces, power and water supply and public sculpture. Rather than decisions about the urban environment being made individually by architects, water authorities, the electricity board and city planners, the SI saw an increase in cooperation between each speciality. This would eventually lead to the blurring of the

distinctions between each separate discipline.

As the 'spectacle' pervades all aspects of life, turning lived experiences into 'seemingly lived' ones, the anti-spectacle rhetoric is in danger of being "recuperated by the dominant mechanisms of social organisation"(Vaneigem, 1983, p206) The 'spectacle' can absorb the meanings of all struggles against it and use this to its own ends. "The critical concept of the spectacle can undoubtedly also be vulgarised into a commonplace hollow formula of sociologico-political rhetoric to explain and abstractly denounce everything, and thus serve as a defence of the spectacular system" (Debord, 1977, para.203)

To combat this eventuality, the SI proposed the use of *detournement* as the language of critical theory. *Detournement* is defined by Ralph Rumney, an English member of the SI, as "the taking or using as one's own of another's thoughts, writings or inventions, within a new context"(Home, 1987,p10) or "the conscious manipulation of pre-existing elements in the creation of 'aesthetic' works." (Home, 1987, p11)

Through *detournement* "language can be reinvested with desire, theory with its realisation, and gestures with the spontaneous pleasure of their creation."(Plant, 1992, p86) The 'spectacle' could be subverted by 'reinvesting' past culture with its subversive intent restored or reversed. The hollow nature of the 'spectacle' with its lack of genuine creativity would be highlighted by the reuse of that which it has already recuperated. The Situationists 'reinvested' comic books, posters, advertisements and art works with their contents altered. The lack of action in support of past theory would be obvious by its reinvestment in a new context. By glorifying the spectacles' powers of recuperation all areas of spectacular life could be exposed as mere representation.



Fig. 3
Jamie Reid, Sex Pistols,
Holidays in the Sun, Detoured
holiday brochure, 1977.

with the group's rigorous criteria (a policy adopted by McLaren in his running of the Sex Pistols). Because of this, a schism occurred in 1962 which saw the setting up of the Second Situationist International. Debord expelled this more art-based faction due to the fundamental difference over the question of the status of art within society and the organisation itself. It is the Debord faction which is credited with helping to spark the '68 revolt in France.

The schism led to the SI being classified as a political movement rather than an art movement, the 2nd International having been suppressed by the SI and its influence in Britain and America limited. The cultural side of the movement was thus ignored or forgotten.



Fig.4
Detoured comic book, Paris
1968.

The split in the SI represents the failure of the movement to marry political and cultural activities. The SI originally sought to gain political ends through subverting art, to realise art by suppressing it, that is by suppressing the outmoded hierarchy of bourgeois art. Art would have to manifest itself in peoples' everyday lives, thus realising itself.

Although this intent is expressed explicitly in Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), by this stage the Situationists had ceased attempting to suppress art and were now merely ignoring its existence.

The paradox of trying to destroy art as it exists by participating in it had not been overcome by any of the Situationists' predecessors. The Situationists were aware of this fact yet saw it in a positive light. "Every attempt (thwarted until now) to realise this project marks a point of possible departure for new historical life." (Debord, 1987, para. 143)

The Situationists believed that the society which would exist after the collapse of the 'spectacle' would organise itself according to the laws of play -

[In] a society in which play will be completely unrestricted... we may expect to find the following :

- Rejection of all leaders and all hierarchies.
- Rejection of self-sacrifice.
- Rejection of roles.
- Freedom of genuine realisation.
- Transparent social relationships.

(Vaneigem, 1983, p200)

The SI's emphasis on the importance of play is reminiscent of Schiller's theory of aesthetic play, through which a "joyous kingdom of play and of semblance, in which man is relieved of the shackles of circumstance, and released from all that might be called constraint" (Schiller, p215) could be built, freeing man from forces and laws.

Vaneigem draws a comparison between children's organisation of their play and the organisation of post-spectacular society. Rules exist but are constantly broken and thus rewritten, as the rules change, new games are created while play continues undisrupted. Play ceases if a player assumes absolute control of the game. Self-sacrifice is not compatible with a system of play as "once the idea of sacrifice appears the game becomes sacred and its rules become rites." (Vaneigem, 1983, p201). In this new society the playing of roles would also cease as ,in play, this would inevitably involve

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playing with roles. In spectacular society one's role is predetermined by one's upbringing, complete dedication to that role is expected, to the point where one no longer plays the role but is played by the role. In a society organised as a 'game', playing roles becomes playing with roles, where any number of possible roles may evolve. (Vaneigem, 1983, p201)

Although Vaneigem argues that a system of society based on play would yield particular results, he fails to suggest how such a 'game' would be sustained, how leaders would be prevented from rising, how rules would be prevented from becoming rites. It is this inability to determine a method of maintaining a system beyond authority and hierarchy which has dogged the avant-garde since its inception.

The avant garde is seen to have failed to integrate art into the life-praxis, because without a change in bourgeois society there can be no change in methods of production, distribution and consumption of art. Yet surely it is possible for art to manifest itself in more than one way, on more than one level. The mere existence of the utopian avant garde proves this to be possible. The hierarchy of bourgeois art may remain in place but this does not compel artists to work within it. "The end of cultural history manifests itself on two opposite sides: the project of its supersession in total history, and the organisation of its preservation as a dead object in spectacular contemplation. One of these movements has linked its fate to social critique, the other to the defence of class power." (Debord, 1987, para. 187)

When the avant garde proclaimed art to be dead, the implication was that it was no longer relevant in its existing form, not that it no longer existed.

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manifestation of art realised in everyday life, the ultimate goal of the avant garde.

The art hierarchys' claims that the avant garde failed and that its various manifestations could not be considered art, require no disproving for two reasons. Firstly, the avant garde proclaimed this hierarchy irrelevant in 1916, so it is the last institution which could convince it of it's failure; and secondly, the title of "art" attributed to actions has never been important to the avant garde, but rather the affects of these actions.

KEEP WARM THIS WINTER, MAKE TROUBLE

Although links can be made between punk and many of its art-based predecessors - for example Futurism, Dada and Fluxus - it is the methods of the Situationist International, and to a lesser extent Warhol's Factory, which inspired and influenced punk's hierarchy the most. Malcolm McLaren and Jamie Reid, the core of Glitterbest - the Sex Pistols' management - were deeply affected by the events in Paris of May 1968 and became involved with King Mob, a London-based organisation influenced by the SI and New York street gang the Motherfuckers. Both attempted to recreate the spirit of '68 by staging a sit-in at Croyden Art School. Reid went on to illustrate the first anthology of Situationist writings in English - Christopher Gray's *Leaving the Twentieth Century*.

In 1970 Jamie Reid started the "Suburban Press" a printing co-op which began by publishing *Suburban Press* a Croydon community magazine in a "shit-stirring format, with thorough research into local politics and council corruption, mixed with [Reid's] graphics and some Situationist texts" (Reid, 1987, p35) The magazine applied the Situationist's critique of town planning and architecture to the development of Croyden.

The press went on to print a series of stickers and posters which exemplify Situationist methods. A sticker reading "Official Warning Last Days, Buy now while stocks last" was stuck in supermarkets to increase panic buying and hoarding. Another ran "This week only this store welcomes shoplifters". These stickers were stuck up on shops on Oxford St. one night and when the same people entered the

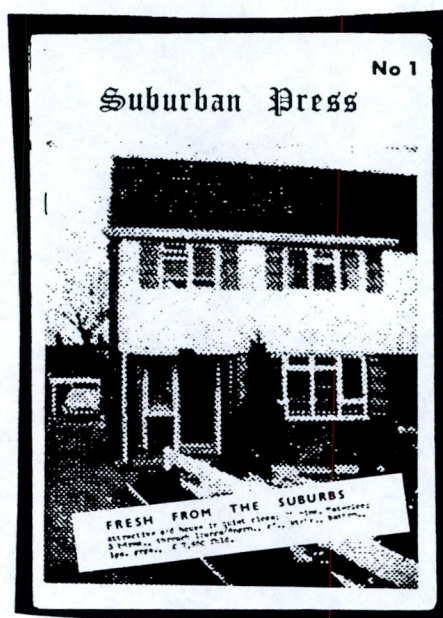


Fig. 5
Suburban Press, 1970.



Fig. 6
Jamie Reid, Suburban Press
sticker, 1972.



Fig. 7
Jamie Reid, Suburban Press
sticker, 1972.

shops the following day and openly shoplifted, pointing out the stickers when apprehended, they were let off the hook. (Reid, 1987, p43)

A sticker headed 'Passenger Control' mimics London Transport notices and looks unassuming in the Underground environment. It advocates "the setting up of workers and neighbourhood councils which would be the first step towards a total revolution of everyday life and liberation from the boredom and alienation exemplified by this train journey" (Reid, 1987, p43) paraphrasing Vaneigem's assertions in *Traites de savoir vivre a l'usage des jeunes generations*.

Graphics from the stickers and Reid's work on Christopher Gray's *Leaving the Twentieth Century* found their way into Sex Pistols record sleeves and advertisements - particularly the single

PASSENGER CONTROL

Passengers may have wondered what would happen if the controls of this train refused to function. Such an occurrence might well result in passengers being forced to remain on the train, possibly under emergency conditions, for some time. In such a situation, passengers would be thrown much closer together, this would naturally cause some difficulties. You would tend to respond by recognising your common situation, and unusual feelings of sympathy and solidarity would be established. In this case you would draw strength from communicating with other people, perhaps for the first time.

Now, suppose our own controls, just like the trains, refused to function. What would happen if we simply smashed those controls. Refused to pay the fare on this train for instance or when we got to work, took the place over collectively and ran it as WE wanted it. We could even abolish boring work altogether now that the advance in technology has exposed work for what it really is - a means of keeping our minds unquestioning of our desires and in chains. We could do ANYTHING. Completely abolish hierarchical society and change the whole fabric of human relationships. The setting up of workers and neighbourhood councils would be the first step towards a total revolution of everyday life and liberation from the boredom and alienation exemplified by this train journey.

Why not talk to the person next to you about taking over the controls?



Fig. 8
Suburban Press sticker designed
by Jamie Reid, 1972.

Holidays in the Sun.

McLaren's involvement with the Situationist-inspired King Mob was minimal but significant. It brought him into contact with the ideas and methods, particularly the Situationist 'spectacular' theory, which he and Reid would use to subvert the media, monarchy and music industry.

Jon Savage describes McLaren's only active

KEEP WARM
THIS WINTER
MAKE TROUBLE

Fig. 9
Jamie Reid, Sticker, 1972, later
used on Sex Pistols, *Holidays*
in the *Sun* poster

involvement with King Mob when in December 1968 twenty five members of the organisation, one dressed as Santa Claus, invaded Selfridge's toy department and started handing out toys to children as their astonished parents looked on. A flyer distributed to clarify their actions read " Christmas, it was meant to be great but it's horrible....Let's smash the great deception. Light up Oxford Street, dance around the fire."(Savage, 1991, p34)

The sweeping slogans and self-promotion of the Situationists captured Reid and McLarens' imaginations and these aspects of the movement were to become a major part of the punk aesthetic and methods.



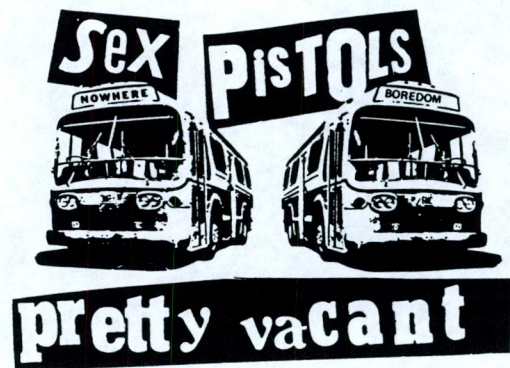
Fig. 10
King Mob flyer 1969, inspired by
a Motherfuckers' hand bill.

The SI's theory broke no new ground but their methods of relating these ideas made them accessible and exciting to a far wider audience. Much of the SI's writings are shrouded in hyperbole but their use of graffitied slogans and direct action brought their ideas to street level. Reid became obsessed with the idea of compressing complex theories into sharp, immediate graphics, much of his

political graphic work eventually found its way into Sex Pistols' artwork. "I found the Situationist texts to be full of jargon - almost victims of what they were trying to attack I was trying, say, to summarise a whole chapter of a book in one image." (Reid, 1987, p38)

The SI may have had little real influence on the events of '68, but their ability to manipulate the situation for their self-promotion is as important in its influence on McLaren as the theories of the

Fig. 11
Jamie Reid's poster for the Sex
Pistols' *Pretty Vacant*. Originally
used in Situationist inspired
magazine *Point Blank!* Berekly,
1973.



organisation. Throughout the rise of the Sex Pistols McLaren manipulated events, which were out of his control, by claiming they were intentional actions, taken to promote the group and their intention to subvert the music industry.

The influences on and contributors to the Sex Pistols are numerous and varied. McLaren, an ex-art student, initially saw pop music as a way to sell the clothes from 'Sex', 430 King's Road, the shop which he owned and ran with Vivienne Westwood. The shop went through many name and styling changes since they acquired it in 1971, Let It Rock, Too Fast to Live, Too Young to Die, Sex and then Sedationaries.

McLaren provided rehearsal room to Steve Jones and Paul Cook, both from a working class background in Shepherd's Bush and introduced them to Glen Matlock, a student at St.

Martin's College of Art and Design, and Johnny (Rotten) Lydon (whose

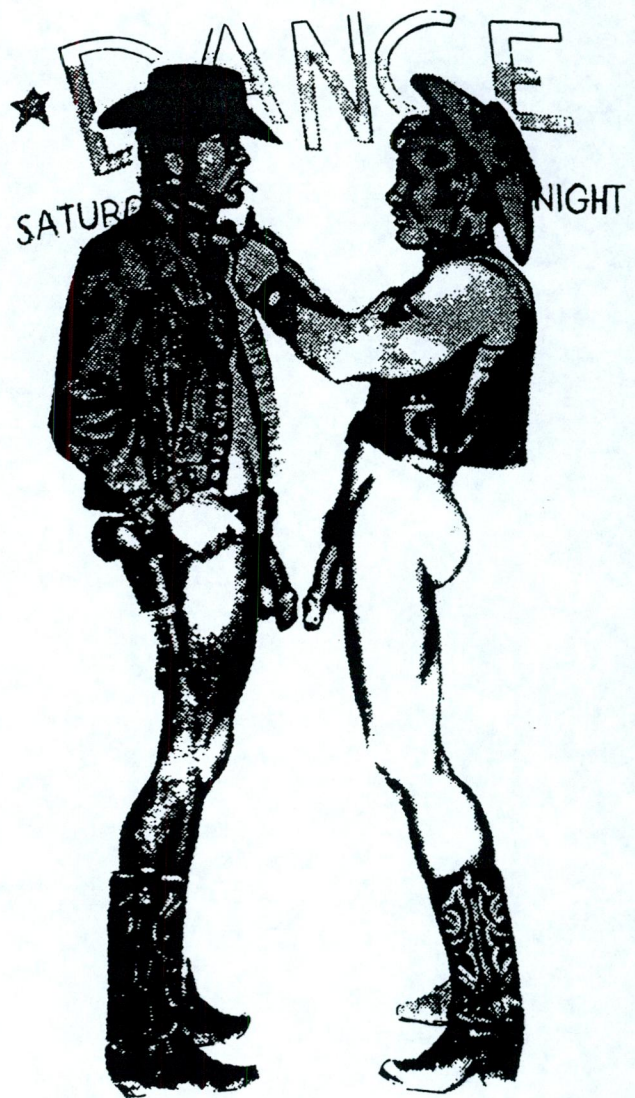


Fig.12
McLaren & Westwood,
Detourned t-shirt design for Sex,
1976.

"Ello Joe, Been anywhere lately
Nah, its all played aht Bill,
Gettin to straight."

friend John Beverly, aka Sid Vicious, became the most notorious Pistol when he was substituted for Matlock).

McLaren, Westwood and Jamie Reid provided the political and artistic elements of the group, in the form of Situationist, King Mob and Motherfucker ideas and graphics. This input provided the basis for the Sex Pistols' assault on the music industry, the monarchy and the media.

Cook and Jones provided a firm footing for the group's working-class image and all their equipment, stolen from Rod Stewart, Keith Richards and Roxy Music amongst others. Their interest in mod groups, The Who, Small Faces and The Faces and in the rising American rock underground



left Fig. 13
Jamie Reid
right Fig. 14
McLaren & Westwood in *Let it
Rock*, 1971.

defined the Sex Pistols' sonic attack. Matlock showed a flair for writing songs and contributed what little melody the music possessed.

Lydon, an intelligent outsider, supplied most of the groups' pointed lyrics and became the focus of the band's interviews and performances. Lydon was the perfect mouthpiece for what McLaren and



Fig. 15
Sex Pistols live 1976.
l-r: Matlock, Rotten, Cook,
Jones.

Reid wished to say, yet this was purely luck on McLaren's part when he choose him for the part, as

Lydon was the least manageable of the group. His waywardness led to him contesting the rights to the Sex Pistols' back catalogue with McLaren.

C h a p t e r T h r e e

ANYONE CAN BE A SEX PISTOL

Yesterday, I was a crud.

Today, I saw the Sex Pistols and now I'm a king.

Joe Strummer, The Clash

I'm going to change the face of the music scene....The Sex Pistols are from the streets and dole queues, they're representative of most of the kids in this country. They can't play very well but that's not important. It's their attitude!

Malcolm McLaren, January 1976.

(Stevenson, 1988, p1)

Stewart Home argues in *The Assault on Culture* that the influence of SI's spectacular theory on punk is minimal, particularly when compared to the influence of Richard Allen's Skinhead novels and football hooliganism on "punk's non-intellectual origins in British street culture." (Home, 1991, p82). Home's initial presumption that punk existed as a street level movement before McLaren appropriated and manipulated it for his own ends, and his suggestion that this 'street' movement held far more influence over the movement than the Sex Pistols' hierarchy, are as wide spread as they are untrue.

The rise and dissemination of the punk aesthetic in both music and fashion, while bearing a resemblance to the rise of previous youth sub-cultures, was also a genuinely new phenomenon in many respects. The differences in its origination and culmination to those of previous movements highlights the amount of control that Glitterbest, through the Sex Pistols, had over the movement. The reason that this manipulation was possible is also the reason why the movement had on avant garde 'art' function while also working as a sub-culture

style.

Up to this point pop groups had adapted to styles so as to appeal to an existing market, as established acts are the only ones who can afford to experiment, or plagiarise the work of the lesser-known pop vanguard, and influence style. The Who became mods in order to capture the increasing numbers who wore mod fashion and listened to Motown and r'n'b. The Sex Pistols defined their own style and thus instigated change rather than adapting to it.

Although punk's sound and image was very much influenced by American 'garage' music of the early seventies such as that of the Ramones, The Stooges, Television, MC5 and the New York Dolls (McLaren managed the New York Dolls before they split up in 1975) punk was focused and defined - musically, visually and politically - by the actions of the Sex Pistols and Glitterbest.

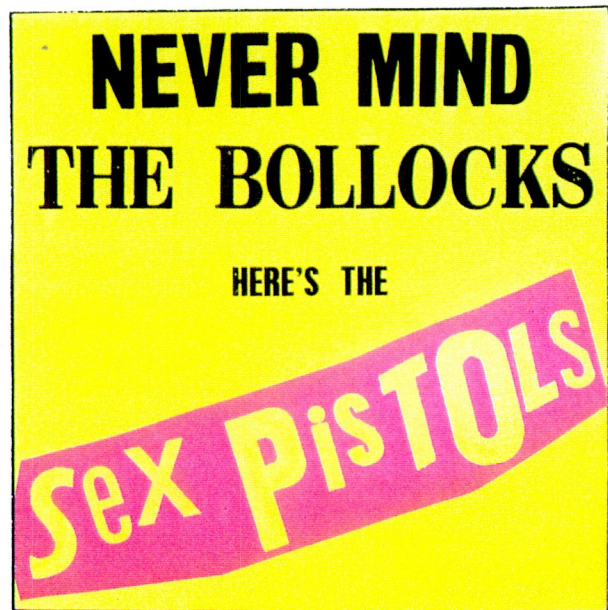


Fig. 16
Reid's artwork for the Sex
Pistols' *Never Mind the
Bollocks* LP, 1977.

Punk rock did not exist in Britain before the Sex Pistols appropriated the American garage sound and coupled it with their nihilistic aggression. Glitterbest encouraged the setting up of similar groups - The Clash, Siouxsie and the Banshees - as this would improve the Sex Pistols' initial impact as leaders of a new movement/style rather than an

The Great Punk Rock Storm

The Sex Pistols are leaders of the "punk rock" pop cult. They hurled four-letter words at Grundy during an interview on Thames TV's tea-time programme *Today* on Wednesday.

individual occurrence. McLaren and Reid, aware that oddities attract attention purely for curiosity value and rarely sustain media interest, wanted the group to have as large an impact as possible. (Punk was beginning to happen in London, but the Sex Pistols' attitude raised it above the level of pub rock.)

It was strictly led by suburban middle class youths and many who were somewhat older, particularly those involved with Glitterbest. The working-class style was adopted both in homage to earlier working class youth sub-cultures - teddy boys, mods and rockers - and in an attempt to appear genuine and uncontrived. The class dichotomy, both perceived and eventually existing, brought on the early decline of the movement

Although the early punk groups were perceived to be disaffected unemployed, most of them actively dropped out of working as is the prerogative of some educated suburbanites. Their aspirations were the same as those of the SI, although only a few were aware of the SI's activities during the sixties.

As punk performers were from middle class backgrounds, their involvement in punk signified a denial of their parents' aspirations. They did not view punk as a way of bettering themselves, of climbing out of their social class. As with every aspect of punk the second generation were the antithesis of the original punk instigators. As punk was not profit-driven it was open to experiment on every level, thus opening it up to the application of situationist theory.

The Sex Pistols' dealings with the press and record companies also represent a new departure in pop. On 1 December '76 the Sex Pistols appeared on Thames *Today* show in place of record label mates Queen, who were unable to appear. Presenter Bill Grundy knew nothing of the band before the interview as did the general public. Aggravated by

TV's Bill Grundy in rock outrage

the group's lack of status (The Sex Pistols at this stage in their career were a poor substitute for the 'star' quality of Queen) and their lack of interest in both himself and his television programme, Grundy goaded the band to "say something outrageous". The invitation could hardly be refused by a group whose initial statement of intent pledged 'Anarchy in the UK'.

Grundy: Go on, you've another five seconds. Say something outrageous.

Jones: You dirty bastard.

Grundy: Go on, again.

Jones: You dirty fucker!

Grundy: What a clever boy.

Jones: What a fucking rotter.



Fig. 17
Reid's poster graphics for the
Sex Pistols' debut single,
Anarchy in the UK, 1976.

Lorry driver James Holmes, 47, was outraged that his eight-year-old son Lee heard the swearing . . . and kicked in the screen of his T.V. "It blew up and I was knocked backwards," he said. "But I was so angry and disgusted with this filth that I took a swing with my boot."

The press outrage over the incident caused a public outcry which increased the press interest, propelled the Sex Pistols into the minds of the British public and resulted in the dismissal of Grundy from Thames and the Sex Pistols from EMI. This media coverage fitted perfectly McLaren and Reid's vision of the group as subversive media manipulators, yet neither had any hand in the event. McLaren later claimed that the interview tactics were a deliberate ploy to gain press attention which would eventually lead to the group's dismissal from

The group was sacked a fortnight ago after reports that they had vomited, spat and swore at Heathrow Airport before leaving for Holland.

"I felt unclean
for 48 hours
after I saw
them"

2-week TV ban on Bill Grundy

EMI (£50,000 better off) or some similar subversive incident.

Up until the Sex Pistols, groups were easily manipulated and sanitised. Groups shared with their record company an interest in increasing sales and so were willing to comply with the companies wishes. Bands could indulge in drugs and vice as much as they wished once they kept this out of the media.

When EMI signed the Sex Pistols they believed that the group would follow the path of the likes of the Rolling Stones and The Who. "It must be remembered that the recording industry has signed many pop groups, initially controversial, who have in the fullness of time become wholly acceptable and contributed to the development of modern music," ran the chairman of EMI's address at the company's AGM, justifying the signing of the group in the face of the ensuing public outrage (Frith, 1990, p199.)

It was the Pistols' refusal to apologise or curb their public actions which marked them as genuinely anti-social and led to the group's dismissal from the label. The public was outraged, not because of their actions, which were nothing new, but because the group appeared uninterested in being liked or accepted. They actively promoted their 'lack of talent' and displayed a blatant disregard for fame and fortune. The fact that no driving motive could be detected for the group's actions other than a genuine nihilistic streak in their nature, marked the Sex Pistols as truly different from previous rock rebels. In fact both these myths which surrounded the group were completely false. The Pistols were very competent musicians. Practising five days a week during '75 and '76, they perfected their wall of sound which still sounds vibrant today. The band were also obsessed by fame, particularly Sid Vicious, who achieved his

McLaren knows the score. "Christ," he says, "if people bought the records for the music, this thing would have died the death long since." He knows the kids buy the records for what he calls "the attitude."

'I'm against people who just complain about Top Of The Pops and don't do anything. I want people to go out and start something, to see us and start something, or else I'm just wasting my time.'

ultimate ambition through his death, occupying a place in history alongside Elvis, John Lennon, Jim Morrison, James Dean and Monroe. Their ability to sustain these myths stresses the strength of Glitterbest's promotion and control of the group.

The punk elite which surrounded the Pistols - Jordan, Westwood, Reid, Debbie Wilson, Siouxsie Sioux - perceived the group and themselves, through the way they dressed and carried out their lives, as an art project which challenged people's attitudes and acceptance of the drudgery of their everyday lives. The group forced a break down between art and life, suppressing art to realise it. By demystifying pop they showed that anyone could do it. They gave people the power to create their own culture rather than buying what record companies deemed appropriate. (After the demise of punk, independent record labels such as Factory placed the emphasis on the moment of purchase as creative expression by the consumer, rather than he or she actively becoming involved in music production).

The bohemian lifestyle of the early punk groups and active supporters mirrored that of the Lettrist International and SI members who refused to work in their attempts to live in a constant *dérive* - squatting, sleeping rough, petty theft and drugs.

In this respect the Pistols were also separate from existing pop music and culture. The punk movement represents the antithesis of escapism, preferring to force the grim realities of urban life onto the audience. This was most effective when punk was at its height in '77, when it commanded much media attention. After its decline second and third generation punk bands reverted to preaching to the converted.

Although punk's origins are unique in many respects, much of its rise is in keeping with the traditional mode of youth subcultures.

Art schools have always played a unique

role in nurturing pop music in Britain - Pete Townsend, John Lennon, Eric Clapton and the Kink's Ray Davies all studied at art college. The phenomenon of students applying their fine art-based knowledge to pop music is in keeping with the blurring of the distinction between high and low culture which underpins postmodernism. The high number of art students involved with the Sex Pistols and subsequent punk bands reflects this unique facet of British youth culture.

The Sex Pistols' first three gigs took place at art colleges around London - St. Martin's, Central School of Art and Chelsea School of Art. Much of the audience won over during these early college gigs went on to form the central core of British punk bands - The Clash, The Slits, Subway Sect, The Adverts and Buzzcocks.



Fig. 18
The Clash in 'Pollock' painted
shirts, pose in front of bass
player Simonon's landscape
painting.

Many low culture events influenced punk - reggae, mod, bubblegum pop and garage music, the books of Richard Allen, J.G. Ballard, William Burroughs and Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*, and films such as *Quadrophenia*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Scum*. News stories also influenced the image and inspired songs, events



Fig. 19
Jamie Reid, ransom note song
titles, 1976.

such as Gary Gilmore's campaign for his own execution and the subsequent donation of his eyes for transplant operations inspired The Adverts' *Gary Gilmore's Eyes*.

In drawing its influences punk tended to draw no distinctions between high and low culture, identifying equally with Allen's Skinhead books and Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*.

Punk's interest in and glorification of low culture reflects the thinking of the sixties Pop artists. They ridiculed popular culture, the society of the spectacle, while finding it inspiring and exciting. This is just one of the paradoxes which dogged punk. Only those directly involved seemed capable of deciphering the images punk utilised.

Punk's unique origins, through Glitterbest's promotion of the Pistols and the major links between the movement and art schools, completely negate the belief that punk began as a working class 'street' movement, drawing on football hooliganism and the skinhead phenomena for inspiration, and unaffected by Situationist theory. Whether punk followers were aware or not of Situationist theory, their actions and attitudes, inspired by those of the Sex Pistols, show definite Situationist traits - contempt for consumer society and the 'star' system, belief in personal freedom and their persistent use of *detournement* reflect the Situationist influence.

C h a p t e r F o u r **DETOURNING THE MUSIC INDUSTRY**

Most important of all, punk rock is a threat to the music establishment. And if that doesn't deserve to be threatened I don't know what does.

Barry Cain, Record Mirror, 1976.
(Stevenson, 1988, p45)

The Sex Pistols' cultural assault can best be understood as the implementation of Debord's theories put forward in *The Society of the Spectacle*.

Debord believed that modern society is overshadowed and pervaded by the "spectacle...the present model of socially dominant life. It is the omnipresent affirmation of the choice *already made* in production and its corollary consumption"

(Debord, 1987, para. 6). Within this all embracing spectacle the celebrity "embodies the inaccessible result of social labour by dramatising its by-products, magically projected above it as its goal."

(Debord, 1987, para.60) "Passing into the spectacle as a model for identification, the agent renounces all autonomous qualities in order to identify himself with the general law of obedience to the course of things." (Debord, 1987, para.61)

The Sex Pistols undermined the domination of the 'spectacular' star in two ways. Firstly, through the advertising campaign and music of their second single *God Save the Queen* they questioned the Queen's role as "state power personalised as a pseudo-star". Secondly the Sex Pistols, aware of the danger of themselves becoming 'spectacular' stars,

promoted themselves as non-stars, as people off the street, particularly through their affirmation that “anyone can be a Sex Pistol”.



Fig 20
Sex Pistols, Jubilee Week,
1977.

Reid's advertising campaign for the group's *God Save the Queen* single was their most focused assault on the minds of the British general public. When England chose to wallow in its glorious past (rather than face up to the problematic future) by immersing itself in jubilee celebrations, the Sex Pistols focused the dissenting voices with *God Save the Queen*. (The record was artificially kept off the number one position in the charts during jubilee week by a rule governing the chart, introduced the previous week and dropped again a week later. The rule, issued by the British Phonographic Institute, instructed the British Market Research Bureau to discount all chart return shops connected with record companies when compiling the chart. The single was selling most copies in Virgin shops due to increased advertising for it in these stores. These sales were not included in the chart for the one week that the rule was effective.) (Savage, 1991, p365)

During jubilee week the Queen was the most

PISTOLS PROFIT WITH QUEEN 'INSULT'

*The lyrics go something
like:
God save the Queen, a fascist
regime
It made you a moron, a potential
H-bomb
God save the Queen.
She ain't no human being.
There is no future in England's
dream.*

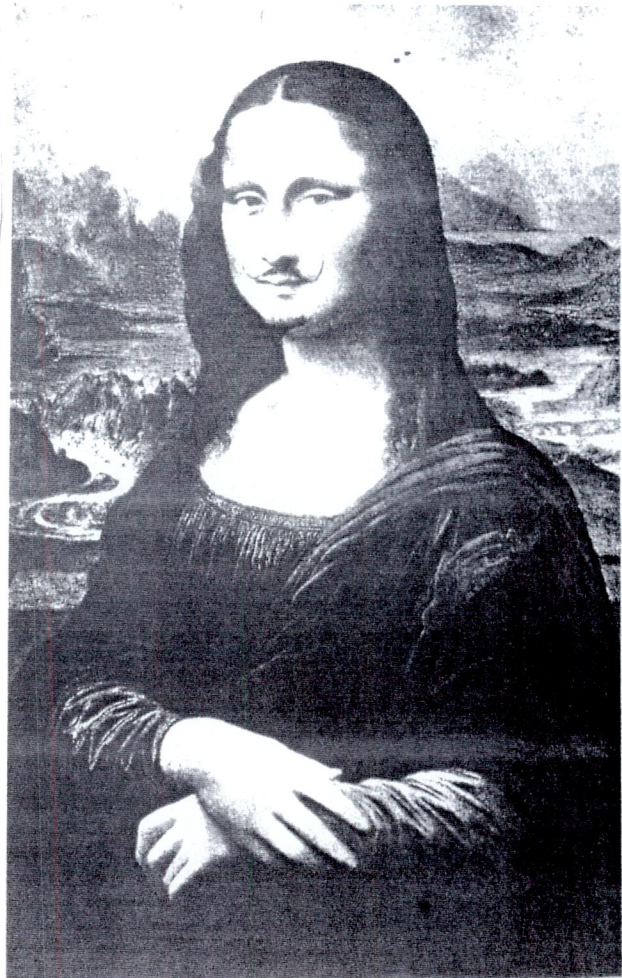
important celebrity in Britain, "The opposite of the individual, the enemy of the individual" as Debord dubbed stars. The actions of the Sex Pistols represent the actions of the individual, free to create their own destiny, rather than accept their given role in 'spectacular' society.

Reid's graphics for the single were his best adaptation of situationist techniques, and as such they represent Situationisms' most influential manifestation. For the campaign, Reid *detoured* the official Cecil Beaton portrait of the Queen (taken from the pages of the Daily Express) by placing a safety-pin through the lips. In other versions he placed swastikas in her eyes (this image was banned from use by the record company) and blocked out the eyes and mouth with his by now widespread 'ransom note' lettering, placing the Queen in the role of criminal or terrorist. The image is reminiscent of Marcel Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.*

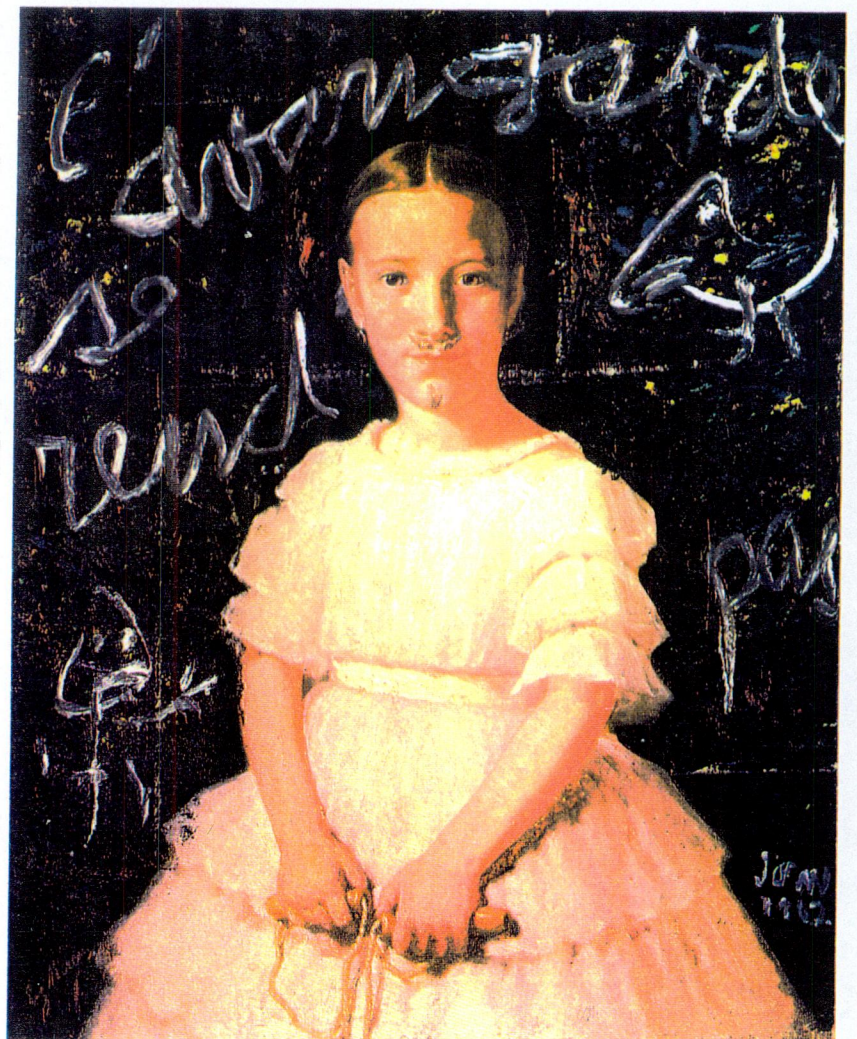
Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* questions people's perception of art by subverting (*detourning*) DaVinci's *Mona Lisa*, adding a moustache and beard to a reproduction and the punning title. *L.H.O.O.Q.* sounds in French like 'Elle a chaud au cul'.

Asger Jorn's *Modified Pictures*, the SI's largest collection of *detoured* art, were inspired by Duchamp's painting, using a similar technique, painting over kitsch art prints. Reid's subversion of the Queen's portrait is a continuation of this tradition.

The advertising campaign subverted the jubilee celebrations by mimicking the souvenirs of the event, posters, tee-shirts, stickers, streamers and transfers for use on mugs. Television, radio and press advertisements were prepared. The posters which adorned London buses used the portrait without any of Reid's additions or advertising copy. From a distance the graphics resembled the official



above Fig. 21
 Jamie Reid, *God Save the Queen*. Safety pinned lips.
 right Fig. 22
 Marcel Duchamp,
L.H.O.O.Q., 1919. Rectified
 Readymade.



above Fig. 23
 Jamie Reid, *God Save the
 Queen*, swastika eyes.
 right Fig. 24
 Asger Jorn, *The Avant-garde
 will not give in*, 1962. Modified
 Picture.

jubilee merchandising.

The difficulties which dogged the single's release (CBS workers ceased pressing of the vinyl in protest over the record's contents, platemakers refused to make plates for the printing of the sleeve, LWT refused the TV advert, BBC banned the single while the IBA instructed all commercial radio and television stations not to broadcast the single, Woolworths, Boots and W.H. Smith refused to stock it and Gallup kept the single off number one in the charts) did more to highlight the existence of another England, too disturbing to be acknowledged, than the song, with Lydon's cries of "no future", ever could have.

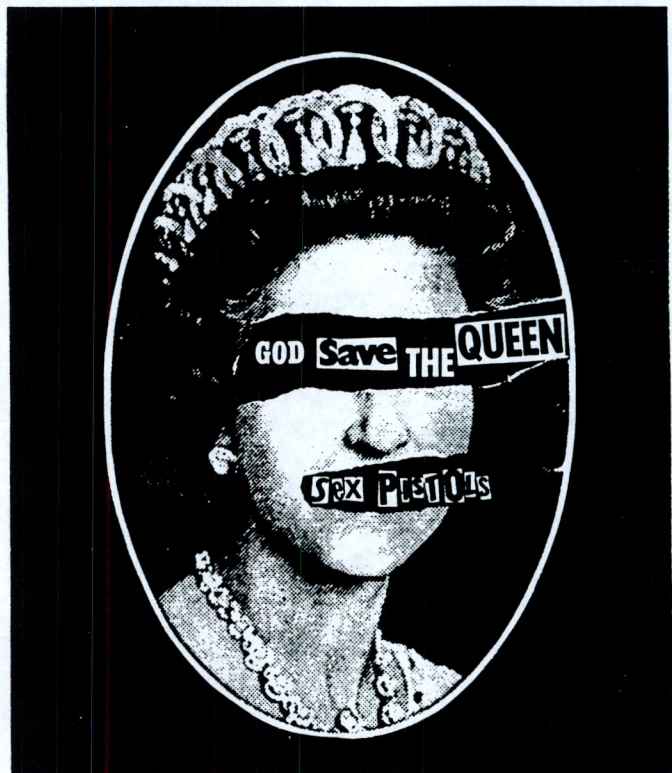


Fig. 25
Final sleeve design with '
'ransom note' lettering.

The attacks on the group became physical after the media outcry which accompanied the single's release. Reid received a broken leg and nose, Lydon lost the use of his left hand in a stabbing, and Paul Cook was severely beaten, all within one week.

The SI believed that through the creation of situations, subsequent situations could be sparked causing a chain effect. The latter situations would act independently of the original author, yet continue ideas originated by him or her. With Reid's provocative graphics for *God Save the Queen*, he forced the institutions the Sex Pistols set out to criticise to highlight their own corruption through their reactions.

The Sex Pistols subverted the star system through their promotion of a do-it-yourself approach to music, fashion and writing. The group portrayed pop history almost in cartoon style, without subtleties or taboos, and by doing so they destroyed the aura which surrounded pop, but replaced it with their own myths and legends which have remained integral to pop up to the present day. Up until punk, pop music developed linearly, each movement a progression or negation of the last, but after punk, pop became homogeneous with different movements coexisting, all taking influences from the past and each other. Punk brought pop music into postmodernism.

The Sex Pistols set themselves up in opposition to those who, in the late sixties, saw pop music as art and who actively tried to promote themselves as serious culture. The result of the artistic pretensions of groups like Pink Floyd and Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention was the mystification of the music industry and a division between groups and their audience. 'Art Rock' groups actively enforced a similar hierarchy as that of bourgeois art vis a vis popular music.

Many of the more established acts - The Who, Rolling Stones and The Beatles - were able to survive without alienating their wide fan base, but the early seventies pop underground remained extremely elitist, with groups who crossed over to a wider audience being shunned by those 'in the

know' as having sold out. Punk groups suppressed the 'art' element of rock and returned it to its glory days of the mid-sixties.

Although the Sex Pistols' love of pop music prevented them from ever truly subverting it (their efforts at destroying the myths of rock were perceived as a renaissance of sixties pop) their assault on the workings of the music industry has

PLAY'IN IN THE BAND...FIRST AND LAST IN A SERIES.....

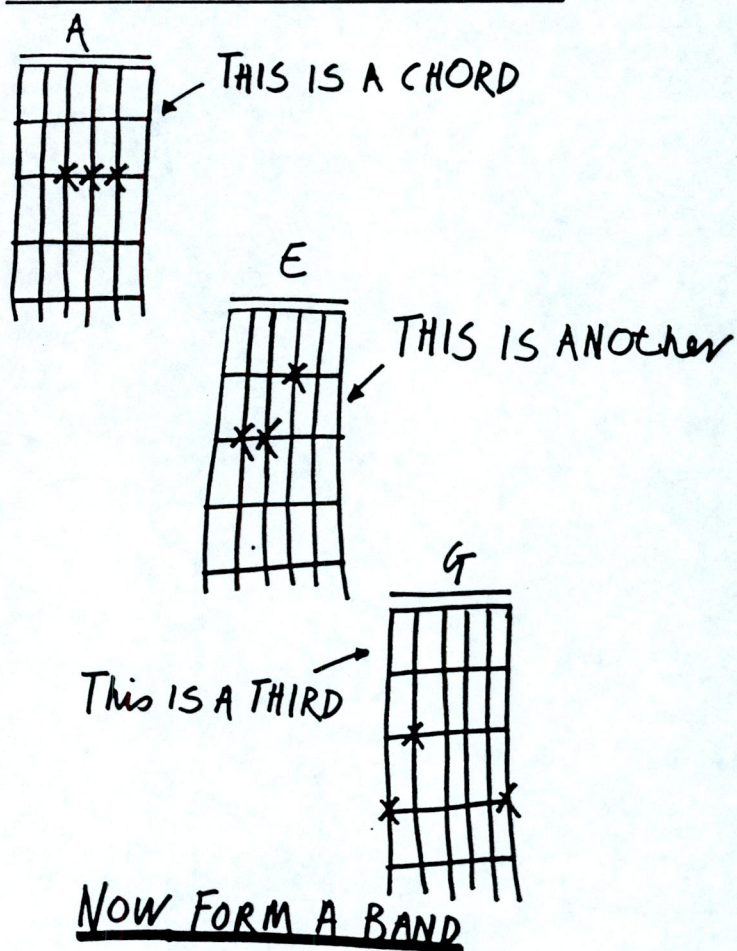


Fig. 26
Fanzine artwork, 1977.

been far more effective and wide reaching.

The Sex Pistols reinstated the choice which the 'spectacle' inherently negated, by reuniting the consumer with the production of their own culture rather than participating in fragmented production of what they themselves did not conceive or consume. The audience and performer merged, fans produced their own records, radio shows and fanzines, organised gigs, and became completely

self-sufficient. the audience could consume exactly what they wanted rather than what was available, by producing it themselves.

The Sex Pistols' reintroduction of choice is manifest in the proliferation of independent record companies who paved the way musically throughout the eighties. New Hormones, Rough Trade, Factory, Stiff and Beggars Banquet released records by Buzzcocks, Stiff Little Fingers, Joy Division, Damned and The Lurkers respectively during '77 and '78. The success and proliferation of 'indie' labels was and still is phenomenal. By 1979 the record company with the most consistent chart success was an independent, Coventry's 2-Tone Records, and by 1981 a new chart system was established to catalogue and promote the thriving avant garde scene.

Lack of consumer choice is a symptom of the exploitation within the music industry in particular and society in general. The Sex Pistols' view of this exploitation is best summed up by Jamie Reid's artwork for the single *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*. The graphic, a *detoured* American Express Card, renames the record company as The Pimp, the artist as The Prostitute and the music business as The Swindle.

The record company, (The Pimp)

The people who own this, own you. They will spend the cash you generate on schemes to increase their own power. You will get a small percentage of what you earn.

The Sex Pistols highlighted the hypocrisy of the music business by first making themselves as tempting to the record companies as possible by having good financial potential and then, having received a large cash advance, refusing to comply with the company's wishes to the point where the company must break the contract with the group to avoid embarrassment and a subsequent decline in

YOUNG FLESH REQUIRED

The Great Rock 'N' Roll Swindle



NOT TRANSFERABLE

SEE REVERSE SIDE

The Artist (The Prostitute)
Your name could be here.
Your talents will become a source
of unlimited cash for the Record
Company (The Pimp)

The Business (The Swindle)
Plotted by everyone including
the Record Company, the Manager,
the Promoter, the Press, the Disc Jockey
and if you're smart, you.

* NOT VALID IF CANCELLED OR REVOKED

The Record Company (The Pimp)
The people who own this own you.
They will spend the cash you
generate on schemes to increase
their own power. You will get a
small percentage of what you earn.

Fig. 27 Jamie Reid, *Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* single poster, 1977.

Pistols pocket £30,000 as EMI settle

profits. EMI, A&M and Warner Brothers were all caught out by the Sex Pistols, greedily wanting to reap the profits from a group over which there was a political and media outcry. The companies were unable to condone their own product.

With the overnight exposure the Pistols received after the Grundy incident (2nd December '76), the Glitterbest organisation found themselves in a position which none of their utopian precursors could boast. The Pistols were the perfect medium for the dissemination of situationist ideas. Both fine art and avant garde politics are elitist by nature and thus limit the scope of people whom they can affect. Not only were the Sex Pistols operating at a mass cultural level, but they were also commanding as much media interest as pop music had during its heyday.

McLaren and Reid both realised the potential of the group, backed by the rising new movement, for raising people's self awareness and criticising commodity capitalism, particularly in Britain. The quick decisions required to sustain the high output of imagery and ideas often resulted in errors. The unqualified use of Nazi symbols caused many repercussions, but Glitterbest were anxious to make the most of their unique opportunity. The Sex Pistols, through Reid's sharp graphic sense, were able to distil sixty years of avant garde thought and disseminate it at the level which would maximise its potential.

It is the reaction to the Sex Pistols' exploits rather than the sum total of those actions - music, artwork and attitudes - which makes them significant in a 'serious culture' sense.

With postmodernism, the concept of an artist as 'genius' and their work as constituting high art because of this status is questionable, if not completely negated. Distinguishing between high and low culture on the basis of the perceived

"I think the
Sex Pistols are
absolutely
bloody
revolting"

intellect of the consumer of that culture is also in doubt, as Nik Cohn puts it in pop music terms:

Where the way to break the pop market is simply to shout, to be louder and flashier and more vulgar than the competition, the [musical] avant garde has to be breached by stealth, by intellectual flattery, by the suggestion that only the very finest minds could possibly understand the product offered. On that basis, though, the intelligentsia is maybe even more gullible than the kids.

(Cohn, 1970, p216)

This concept can be applied in a more general sense to cultural consumption. 'High' art is presently given its status because those who consume it, the intelligentsia, the rich and famous, deem it to be high art. No objective judgement is made over the work's form or content. The intelligentsia, guilty of snobbery and elitism, are as much the victims of subjective taste, rather than objective analysis, as the 'man on the street'. Their taste is merely different from that of the masses rather than superior to it.

Because of this elitism, art has rendered itself ineffective. To counter-act this the Situationists suggest that art can only be assessed by the reactions, both positive and negative, which it commands, particularly at the level on which people live from day to day. The Sex Pistols' ability to cause institutions to subvert themselves and to inspire people to alter the everyday running of their lives, constitutes Situationism's high point, a closing of the gap between life and art proposed by the Dadaists.

Chapter Five SPECTACULAR RECUPERATION

RECUPERATE, The ability of the Spectacle to hijack or absorb a real demand, threat or aspiration, make it safe and then sell its shadow back to us.

(Law, 1983, p8)

Punk! Don't buy a leather jacket this year. Leather jackets, army jeans, bovver boots have a danger of becoming the next trendy uniform just like denim, and we don't want that.

Jamie Reid, Handbill, 1979.

(Reid, 1987, p105)

They walk around together and try and look trendy,
Well I think it's a shame that they all look the same,
Here they come, the part-time punks.

The Television Personalities,
Part-Time Punks, 1978.



Fig. 28
Sid Vicious 'Action Man'.

The punk movement's biggest failing was its embracing of all that 'dominant culture' found unacceptable purely to attract attention and provoke those in opposition to their ideas. Although most of their actions began with a definite intent, they failed to realise the implications which these actions would acquire when disseminated through the media.

For the most part their assault on the myths of religion, work, the monarchy, romance, money and the media were received by the public as they were intended. When the Sex Pistols began flirting with Nazi imagery in an attempt to highlight the fascistic nature of British society, the punk movement found itself battling to redress its racist image and later the attempts of the British Movement and National Front to claim it as their own.

Punks' apparent one-dimensional style is deceptive as it is very much reliant on irony to make its point, far more so than any of its subcultural predecessors. Some of the audience and most of the general public took everything the groups said at face value. Unfortunately the Sex Pistols (Glitterbest) never fully realised how much their message was being misinterpreted.

By 1978, when the dangers were apparent, punk groups were still using irony to deal with subjects which required clear, obvious handling. Stiff Little Fingers sang on *White Noise*:

Rastus is a nigger. Thug mugger junkie.

Black golly gob. Big horny monkey.....

.....Paddy is a moron. Spud thick mick.

Breeds like a rabbit. Thinks with his prick.

CAPITAL Radio started the ball rolling when it banned the Pistols' current single, "Holidays In The Sun", on the basis that the song likens Belsen to a holiday camp. The ban was imposed despite the fact that it had already been played intermittently, had actually made the Capital hit-line, and that they had accepted 10 advertising spots for it.

Upon its release the song's contents were raised in parliament and the band were condemned as sick racists. The group were in fact Irish and the song was an attempt to highlight the prejudice they had encountered in England. The song could be easily appropriated by those whose beliefs they were trying to undermine. Thus the song is essentially racist to any listener unaware of the group's background or punk's basic aspirations and conventions.

Punks' anti-racist lyrics continually reached the general public with the content subverted and polluted by the media through which it was broadcast. The Clash's *White Riot*, also fell foul of misinterpretation. The song was a call to arms for white youth to join in solidarity with black youths who clashed with the police during the 1976 Notting Hill Carnival, sparked by the oppressive 1,600 strong police presence. The song was written after the group found themselves reliving the events of Colin MacInnes' *Absolute Beginners*. The book tells



Fig. 29
Back of *The Clash*, The
Clash. Photograph of the
1976 Notting Hill race riots.

of a young white photographer who is rudely
awaken by the 1958 Notting Hill race riots.

All the power's in the hands
Of the people rich enough to buy it
While we walk the streets
Too chicken to even try it
Are you taking over or are you taking orders,
Are you going backwards, or are you going forwards.

The Clash, *White Riot*, 1977.

The song found its way onto the soundtrack
of the BBC series *The Rock 'n' Roll Years* over
news footage about the rising tide of racist attacks
and re-emergence of the National Front. The context
within which the programme researchers used the
song shows how the public perceived the song.

Although the punk movement, and the Sex
Pistols in particular, understood that they could
subvert the media and use it to their own ends, they

failed to realise the power of the media and its ability to play the same game, subverting the Sex Pistols' message in turn. Glitterbest worked on the principle that all exposure, both positive and negative, would work for them. "Cultivate hatred, it's your only asset" McLaren later espoused as one of the ten lessons of management of the "swindle".

In retrospect it is easy to see that this approach, flirting with the media, was not only dangerous but also contributed to the downfall of the punk movement. Once punk crossed over into mainstream culture as the latest youth subculture (in media terms this occurred just after the Bill Grundy incident) Glitterbest had a constant battle

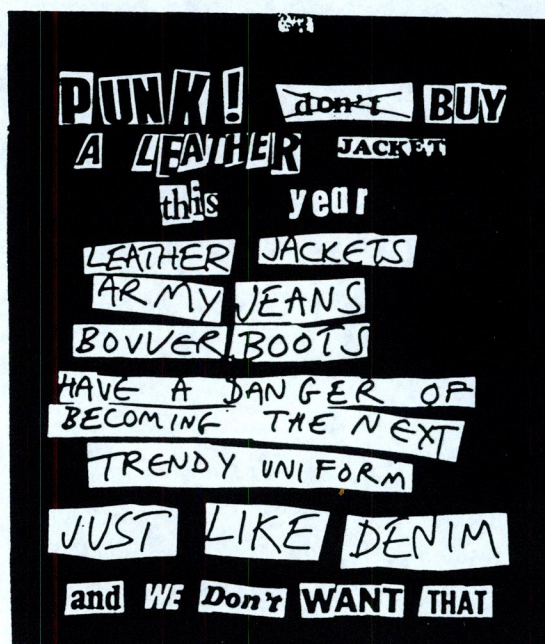


Fig. 30
Jamie Reid graphic, 1979.

on their hands to maximise exposure, and thus spread their ideas, and at the same time maintain a contrary position to the 'dominant culture'.

The period when the Sex Pistols were most effective was limited by mass culture's ability to absorb new ideas and repackage them as their own. To begin with, punk had consisted of a wide variety of styles of music, clothes and graphics. The Fall, Wire, Buzzcocks and Slits were all utterly different in sound and image, the only factor which branded them punk was their rejection of the rock hierarchy.

By the end of 1977, a set of punk followers had sprung up and was catered for with punk music, punk clothes, punk magazines, punk shops and punk television, a set style was born and thus punk developed into that which it wished to destroy.

Glitterbest were aware that their actions, through the Sex Pistols, would be 'recuperated' by the 'spectacle'. The subversive actions which the Sex Pistols instigated were soon to be turned into a defined outlet of dissatisfaction for youths, easily categorised and suppressed. Punk would have a cathartic influence rather than inciting action. Dominant society would be pleased that the discontented were to do nothing more than listen to loud music and wear odd clothes. To counter-act this eventual outcome McLaren rewrote the history of the group, before the media could grasp the movement and its implications, in the film *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*.

In the film McLaren plays the lead role, delivering his ten lessons of the 'swindle', on the run from Steve Jones (the Pistols' guitarist), a detective in the film, trying to uncover the truth behind the Sex Pistol's rise. The lessons are:

1. How to manufacture your group.
2. Establish the name Sex Pistols.
3. Sell the Swindle.
4. Do not play. Don't give the game away.
5. How to steal as much money as possible from the record company of your choice .
6. Become the world's greatest tourist attraction.
7. Cultivate hatred. It's your greatest asset.
8. How to diversify your business. What a business .
9. Taking civilisation to the Barbarians.
10. Who killed Bambi.

The lessons relate to points in the group's career and the overall insinuation is that, from the

It was inevitable. The Pistols' album shot straight to the top of the charts and the band have earned an estimated £250,000 in their two years together.

outset, the group was an elaborate plot to swindle as much money from the music industry as possible. With lesson four - "Don't play, Don't give the game away" - McLaren claims that the group actively avoided playing live, to hide their lack of talent, rather than revealing the fact that they were prohibited from playing live because of council bans on the group.

Throughout the film the group's 'takings' are rung up on a cash register and eventually McLaren absconds to Brazil with the group's fortune. By playing up the media's belief that the group was purely a cynical cash-in, the Sex Pistols came to represent sound business sense, pure capitalism. Rather than being against the capitalist system, the group appeared to be exponents of capitalism and as such their immoral activity highlighted its negative aspects - greed, corruption, violence, injustice.

The film attempted to highlight the music industry as indistinguishable from all other forms of production, save the addition of an all-pervading mystique. Ironically the film revised the group's history so successfully that it created a myth about the group which has yet to dispel. "We failed to exploit the myth in the way we wanted to, in fact we helped to perpetuate it" says Reid of the *Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*. (Reid, 1987, p85)

The rise of street level punk saw a division of the movement. The 'street' movement retained the punk title and made it their own, forcing the Mohican and tartan bondage image into the minds of the general public. Those more closely related to the Sex Pistols' original ideals diverged musically and set themselves apart from punk, these groups - New Order, The Fall and Magazine are examples - were dubbed 'new wave' groups although this does not denote a set musical style, but rather a uniform attitude.



Fig. 31
Dead Kennedy's graphic for
their *Nazi Punks Fuck Off!*
single.

Essentially, punk in its true form had ended in Britain by 1979 and the emphasis shifted back to America, where the sound had originated. American punk gained the name 'Hardcore' and was repoliticised - the lyrics centred on alienation and boredom. Records such as Husker Du's *Zen Arcade* and Minor Threat's *Out of Step* brought punk's musical scream of desperation to its ultimate conclusion. The earliest and most renowned hardcore group were the Dead Kennedys, formed in San Francisco in 1977. The sleeve to their 1979 single *California Uber Alles* was designed by Jamie Reid. The group, lead by Jello Biafra, brought the censorship issue to the fore by including H.R. Geiger's *Penis Landscape* as a poster insert with their *Frankenchrist* LP. The band won the right to include the painting after a lengthy court battle over the suitability of its contents. The subversive nature of the hardcore movement is exemplified by Big Black's 1987 *Songs about Fucking* LP.

In general, someone is a thing of value if and only if he or she is willing to submit to whatever degradation and abuse is required to preserve that position. Anything less betrays a lack of commitment.

Sleeve notes, Big Black, *Songs about Fucking*, 1987.

Perhaps hardcore's most influential offspring is Matt Groening's *Simpsons*. Groening played drums with Seattle punk band the Fastbacks in the early eighties. Much of the sharp insight of the hardcore movement is visible in *The Simpsons*. Despite this exception hardcore exists as an underground movement and as such has limited influence on mainstream culture and thinking.

To some extent, hardcore repeated punk's rise and absorption into mainstream culture. The international success of American hardcore group Nirvana in 1991 saw the re-emergence of the punk

style, yet their influence has been stifled by the success of major record companies to cultivate their own unsubversive 'Grunge' groups to fill this growing market. Pearl Jam exemplify this.

As the Sex Pistols represent a mass culture manifestation of Situationist ideas and methods, their inability to sustain the 'situation' they created represents Situationism's inability to act outside the limits of vanguard art.

C o n c l u s i o n

The Sex Pistols are an undoubted success based on an idea called punk rock, which sets out to trail blaze a path of anarchy and ruin within a culture that chooses to destroy us by making our decisions for us.

Punk rock's cause is to create as much fuss, havoc, excitement as possible, crime pays us.

Punk's slogans are - cash from chaos - believe in the ruins - never trust a hippie - anarchy is the key, do-it-yourself is the melody - in other words ROT 'N' ROLL.

The media was our helper and lover and that in effect was the Sex Pistols' success, as today to control the media is to have the power of government, God or both.

It is all that matters to explain our great rock 'n' roll swindle. A true swindle of ideas that gives you back the right to decide for yourself.

(Reid & McLaren, sleeve notes to
C'mon Everybody single 1979)

As a negative movement which seeks the supersession of art in a historical society where history is not yet lived, art in the epoch of its dissolution is simultaneously an art of change and the pure expression of impossible change. The more grandiose its reach, the more its true realisation is beyond it.

(Debord, 1987, para. 190)

To a degree the Situationist activities of the Sex Pistols were a success for the short period "when nobody knew where they were coming from - when people call you anarchist and fascist in the same week - but that didn't last long." (Reid, 1987, p57)

The speed with which the group and punk as a whole were 'recuperated' by the 'spectacle' raises two issues. Firstly, whether or not it is possible to maintain a contradictory stance while working within the system one is trying to subvert. Secondly, is the failure of punk to sustain its assault on the 'spectacle' essentially the 'recuperation' of Situationist theory by the 'spectacle', as is

suggested by Dave and Stewart Wise in *The End of Music*?

The widespread involvement of students and factory workers, both in Paris and across France, in the events of May 1968 suggest that it is possible to sustain an antagonistic position while operating within the mainstream. The significance of the events is heightened by the fact that the disturbances were not incited by economic hardship. France was experiencing a period of relative affluence during the sixties. The incident represents the participants' dissatisfaction with everyday life and the ability of the extreme left to instigate action on a massive level. Although the events, judged with this in mind, appear to signal the possible dissemination of avant-garde ideas through the mainstream, the 'recuperation' of punk illuminates its true significance. The protests, strikes and occupations lasted only two weeks, after which De Gaulle restored control. (De Gaulle won over seventy per cent of the seats in the subsequent general election that June.) The disturbances of these two weeks were purely the beginnings of a 'revolution of everyday life'. Once this initial shock was incurred the dominant system soon regained its equilibrium, recuperating the entire phenomenon.

The inability of the Pistols to sustain their critique; the ability of the media to subvert their intentions - to adopt the groups' ideas and beat them at their own game; the public's perception of punk as racist and sexist, and the punk movement's coming "to operate as a social safety-valve" (Plant, 1992, p144) all confirm that it is impossible to subvert dominant culture from within. Thus the avant garde is in a Catch 22 position - it can only survive by existing outside the recognised social order, marginalised and so rendered ineffective - or it can attempt to increase its base, thus entering the mainstream sanitised and disabled.

This inability, emphasised by punk, is reflected in the views of the generation who grew up in the wake of punk rock, documented in Douglas Coupland's *Generation X* and Richard Linklater's *Slacker*. This 'generation' can see no way of opposing commodity capitalism, as all previous attempts have failed, and so opt out of 'commodity' society completely, ignoring it rather than trying to change it. This feeling of apathy and powerlessness is coupled with the general feeling that capitalism is its own worst enemy, that it is only a matter of time before it negates itself.

The Wises, ex-members of King Mob, suggested in *The End of Music* that punk caused the 'recuperation' of the Situationist critique by using it "as a force able to keep pop and music kicking as pacification agent of the young proletariat both in terms of channelling energy into hierarchical aspiration, fake liberation from drudgery and the goal of a higher level of wage slavery with all its alluring but alienated sexual appeal." (Plant, 1992, p145)

By realising that the length of time that the Sex Pistols' actions would be effective was limited, McLaren attempted to preempt the group's 'recuperation' by the 'spectacle', particularly with the film *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*. By playing up the media's perception of the the group as a money making scheme the Pistols were presented as a vulgar parody of that which they hoped to subvert; the profit orientated music industry. (The group were proclaimed Young Businessmen of the Year 1977 by *Investors Review*).

The media's attention centred on the group's vulgarity and money making aspirations and the truly subversive nature of the group, while remaining understood by punk's supporters, were overlooked by the media, thus the period during which punk was effective was prolonged. While



Fig. 32
Investors Review, Sex Pistols
young business men of the
year 1977.

prolonging the time period, these actions - *detourning* the media - limited the number of people who could possibly be influenced and affected by punk. This minimised McLaren's real control over the 'recuperation' of punk.

Although punk was recuperated, to a small degree on its own terms, this does not however imply that Situationist theory was also absorbed by the dominant system. Punk represents only one area, popular music, to which Situationist theory can be applied. Punk fired Situationism with new life, rather than causing its down fall, opening up its ideas to a new generation.

Due to the nature of the 'spectacle', its ability "to hijack or absorb any real demand, threat or aspiration", it is doubtful if the Situationist project ever presented any real threat to dominant society and even less likely that its theory will lead to its complete subversion in the future. Punk rock is not the cause of the recuperation of Situationist theory, as the theory entered into existence already recuperated, due to its avant-garde nature. Situationism is now out of harm's way in the magazines of the 'right-on' self-publishing left, a self-perpetuating umbrella organisation for subversive theories, whose very existence proves their threat to be neutralised. If such organisations posed a real threat to the dominant system then their day-to-day existence would be continually disabled and subverted by the 'system'.

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