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Punk's 40th Anniversary – An Itchy Sort of Heritage

Punks, Museum of London, 11 March - 8 April 2017

Punk 1976-78, British Library, 13 May - 2 Oct 2016

2016 was the officially designated 40th anniversary of Punk. Two national exhibitions, *Punks* at the Museum of London, and *Punk 1976-78* at the British Library (BL) ran as part of a wider festival, *Punk London*, alongside numerous smaller and regional events. *Punk London* also involved a series of intertwined exhibitions and events across London, to mark the fortieth anniversary of the release of the Sex Pistols single *Anarchy in the UK*. The first punk record is usually identified as The Damned's single *New Rose*. But perhaps the story of The Damned wouldn't do such useful work as a way of mapping the birth, rise, sell out and survival of punk. It says something about both punk and the heritage industry that this once banned single is now the centre of London's heritage and tourist marketing and indeed that the single's anniversary warrants discussion in an academic historical journal.

The British Library exhibition used the rise and fall of the Pistols as a structure through which to map the global reach and ever widening legacies of punk. But as *Punk London* understood, punk was 'always more than a musical genre, punk allowed a generation to express themselves without deference, to invent without fear, and to create without boundaries.'¹ The variety and status of the funders and partners of the project are a useful indicator of how punk and heritage work across genre and give a sense of its shifting, slightly uncomfortable, status. *Punk London* was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, supported by the National Lottery and the Mayor of London (then Boris Johnson). It brought together partners that represented the different ways into and out of punk; the British Library, Doc n

¹ Punk London, *Punk.London, 40 years of subversive culture* (2016) <http://punk.london/> (01/02/17).

Roll Films, 100 Club, Joe Strummer Foundation, Museum of London, The Roundhouse, Universal Music Catalogue and original punky reggae film maker Don Letts, who curated a series at the BFI.

Punk's strong visual and aesthetic traces lend it well to the gallery space. The events organised were as diverse as the partners, crossing visual, musical, commercial and heritage spaces. Fashion designer Paul Smith, for example, hosted an exhibition of Derek Ridgers' photography at one of his shops, sponsored by Canon UK Ltd. Ridgers had originally exhibited his photographs at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in 1978. There was, after all, always an 'art school punk' alongside the 'dole queue' punk.

In the discussions around *Punk London* it became clear that there were limits on how different stakeholders felt that punk's heritage could be expressed, invented and created. The events and reactions to them raise some important questions for historians. Taken together the Punk 40 events offer a useful case study through which to explore questions of emotional ownership and investment in the past and a heritage that both represents and alienates parts of its audience. The anniversary events can help us make sense of an increasing, and diversifying, use of popular culture as a form of social history that extends the invitation to be part of a national or local story.

Punk London raised a lot of questions about who gets to remember what, and how. It also reposed some traditional subcultural hang-ups; the currency of 'authenticity', contempt for 'the sell out', ambivalence over the role of the market, and the marginalisation of experiences beyond a few key players. Prior to the 40th anniversary, punk was already a successfully marketable brand with its own contested heritage, albeit an ironic one. Malcolm McLaren originally claimed that the whole punk movement had been a situationist inspired prank; the *Great Rock N Roll Swindle*. More recently John Lydon (ex- Sex Pistol front man Johnny Rotten) made a short lived appearance on reality television's *I'm a celebrity get me out of*

here, and was the face of Country Life butter in their advertising campaign. The Pistols have even released their own official perfume, perhaps as a pastiche of the growth of celebrity perfumery, perhaps as a cynical commercial endeavour. It ‘leaves a fresh, restless bite of lemon, sharpened and intensified by a defiant black pepper’.² Jamie Reid’s iconic cover art for the Sex Pistols was used as a design on Virgin Money credit card in 2015. Punk had officially, and riotously ‘sold out’. The credit card seemed to sum up contemporary post-subcultural theory. If, as post-subculturalists argue, coherent codes of subcultural resistance have been replaced by acts of self-construction through acts of consumption, then the Virgin credit card makes sense.

The ‘sell out’ is never a very satisfying analytical tool however. Our subcultural theory teaches us that Punk is not just a passively consumed brand. It is actively wielded as part of our story. Punk memory and punk nostalgia are not new. In 2004 Martin McLoone noted that punk nostalgia had been going on for a ‘long time’ already.³ The tenth anniversary of various punk moments between 1986 and 1989 set out the parameters of punk’s nostalgia market and heritage narratives. The Pistols are part of our national heritage. They reformed to mark their twentieth anniversary. Their one-time home in Denmark St, for example, is now a listed building representing the British music industry’s heritage. Rotten’s graffiti on the inside walls of the building have been likened to early prehistorical cave art in cultural significance.⁴ With the market and structures in place it is perhaps not surprising that British Library’s *Punk London* exhibition was popular. Viewing figures were equal with its recent

² Etat Libre D’Orange, *Sex Pistols Eau De Parfum*, (2010).

³ Martin McLoone, ‘Punk music in Northern Ireland, the political power of ‘what might have been’, *Irish Studies Review*, 12, 1 (2004), 29-38.

⁴ Paul Graves-Brown, and John Schofield “‘The most awkward building in England?’: The ‘Rotten’ heritage of ‘Tin Pan Alley’ revisited’, *Antiquity*, 90, 354 (2016), 1629-1642.

exhibition on Alice in Wonderland. This tells us as much about current heritage practices as it does about punk nostalgia.

This fits with the success of recent exhibitions around Kylie Minogue, and David Bowie in the V&A, and The Rolling Stones at the Saatchi for example, used particular icons to bring together audience experience, with design, music production and glimpses into the ‘real life’ behind the product. Other museums have focussed less on key players and more on the networks and alchemy of particular geographical scenes. Some large scale regional projects have brought in large numbers of tourists by telling a local tale, such as The Beatles museum that sits alongside the Tate in Liverpool, or Margate’s Dreamland project that sits as an unruly cousin to the Turner gallery. It is interesting that an attempt to tell one over-riding nationally coherent story of Britain’s pop music heritage, The British Music Experience at London’s O2 Centre, failed but is shortly to be relaunched in Liverpool.

Numerous local independent music projects are collecting and cataloguing local music stories. For example, a current project on the indie music scene in Birmingham uses the lens of one club, The Click Club as an intersection of networks of promoters, and audiences, and as a building block of the global and local music economy.⁵ Even small local music heritage projects, can it seems, raise big questions. The small scale museum of club cultures in Hull, for example, collates the aesthetics of fliers used to advertise the illegal free party scene in the 1990s⁶, and Coventry’s volunteer-run museum based in the City’s ‘2-Tone Village’ celebrates Coventry as a model of multiculturalism as post-war regeneration.⁷

According to punk History ‘There is no future in England’s dreaming’, and perhaps the constant backwards references to previous youth and subcultures attests as much. But here we

⁵ Jez Collins, and Sarah Raine, *'Is There Anyone Out There?' Documenting Birmingham's Alternative Music Scene 1986-1990* (T. C. Club, 2016).

⁶ *Museum of Club Cultures*, <http://www.museumofclubculture.com/> (08/01/2017).

⁷ *The Coventry Music Museum*, <http://www.covmm.co.uk/2016/> (08/01/2017).

are, in the future, looking back and dreaming about its past. Punk heritage, re-enactments and reunions have high subcultural and commercial capital. Punk is no longer a fleeting, youthful expression in the 'here and now'. Marion Leonard and Catherine Strong's work can help us think about music as both memory and heritage.⁸ The way in which music and memory speak of and for each other might help us to make sense of the Sex Pistols at the British Library. Catherine Strong, argues that this shift is itself a product of its time. The images of rock dinosaurs in their 60s and 70s and of audiences' refusal to grow out of their youthful fan cultures have repositioned the relationship between pop cultures (including punk) and temporality.⁹ Leonard sets out a creative tension between formal museum sector and commercial and independent music heritage practices. Rather than dividing the curatorship of fans and the business focus of the Beatles' London, for example, we can see them all as part of a wider historical conversation.¹⁰ *Punk London* explores what happens when popular cultures are used to tell bigger stories, and when something that was never meant to last ends up in a museum. When our own youthful experiences, and our own local music scenes are incorporated into our national heritage we should all feel included, it seems. Except that every attempt to collate a scene draws boundaries, names codes and forms narratives around a cultural expression that excludes as much as invites self-recognition. Rather than criticise what is or isn't included in the *Punk London* events, I am interested in Punk London as an itchy sort of heritage, where the participant/viewer acknowledges that they are represented in the stories presented by heritage projects, but that story just feels wrong. Even in the most

⁸ Catherine Strong, 'Shaping The Past of Popular Music, Memory, Forgetting and Documenting', in Andy Bennett and Steve Waksman (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Popular Music* (Sage, 2015), 419.

⁹ Strong, 'Shaping The Past of Popular Music'.

¹⁰ Marion Leonard, 'The shaping of heritage: collaborations between independent popular music heritage practitioners and the museum sector', in Sarah Baker, (ed), *Preserving popular music heritage: Do-it-yourself, do-it-together*, 11, (Routledge, 2015), 19-30.

traditional punk narratives, there is always an itchy, creative and slightly awkward punk possibility.

Across the country there were also local interventions in the *Punk London* narrative. In Norwich, for example, Matthew Worley from Reading collaborated with Russ Bestley to position Norwich's punk heritage centre stage. Unlike the London events and exhibitions, which shifted punk's status by incorporating it into the most established of heritage forms; museums and national galleries and institutions, the Norwich project, matched form with content. Worley and Bestley produced a zine called *Young Offenders: Punk in Norwich 1976 – 1984*, which, importantly, was a collaboration with local punks, and was distributed for free during a six-week long festival. There were also gigs, pop up exhibits in the cities' Lanes and events in the original punks' 'stomping ground'.¹¹ Brighton Museum brought together two photographers from different areas of the country and different sections of the music press. The two photographers for the exhibition also worked for rival music publications: Ian Dickson, who documented the scene in London, worked for *Sounds*, whilst Kevin Cummings from Manchester published in *NME*.¹² Local satellites and spurs, together with different identity positions, break and break down any attempt at a coherent narrative.

The Museum of London's exhibition collected experiences of men and women from the London punk scene, with a focus on handmades and homemade artefacts, individual memories and personal objects to 'tell the stories of ordinary punks'¹³. It took the heritage exhibition out of the museum space and organised events such as a 2-hour guided tour of punk London. The promotion for *Punks* at the Museum of London emphasised the 'ordinariness' of the tales and memorabilia lent for the exhibition. The objects' and

¹¹ *40 Years of Punk in Norwich*, <http://www.cityofstories.co.uk/40-years-of-punk-in-norwich>, (04/10/16).

¹² Brighton Museum Prints & Drawings gallery, *Photo-punk 40 images from the birth of punk*, Brighton, (November 2016).

¹³ Punk London.

narratives' significance as heritage came from the emotional investment that they carried with them. These objects and stories that once helped young people 'create and craft' their biographies, have become reminders of their past in the present, and a currency that authorises their inclusion in London's heritage.¹⁴

In contrast with these local and individual stories, in some ways the British Library gave us a traditional, top down, individual entrepreneur-led story of punk. Malcolm McLaren was the renegade general, and the Sex Pistols were his foot soldiers. The British Library used the rise and fall of the Sex Pistols as the structure through which to situate punk in its historical context, to map the relationship between DIY and commercial music structures, and to explore the moral panics it spurred and find ways of tracing legacies. By looking at its global spread, the exhibition emphasised punk's importance in memories of the period and intersections with the politics of race and gender.

Punk is a great British success story in the BL timeline, but there are still questions raised and faultiness explored by the exhibition. As curator, Andrew Linehan had been able to use the BL exhibit to put the sound archive and the physical documents together. The audio visual becomes the object. Like punk, the BL exhibit is something of a scavenger act; it moves across different types of evidence, and from different types of position. Leather jackets, verified as original by their owners, sit alongside legal contracts and the reflections of punks as moral panic and folk devils in the mainstream and DIY press. Zine cultures and hand-written notes sat alongside the established music press and tabloid shock stories, as well as personal items contributed from the John Savage archive under the guidance of Colin Farrows.

¹⁴ Christin Feldman-Barrett, 'Documenting the Subcultural Experience, Towards an Archive of Australian Youth Histories' in *Youth cultures and subcultures, Australian perspectives*, Sarah Baker, and Brady Robards (eds), (Ashgate, 2016), 256.

Whilst its narrative structure may be somewhat traditional, in its top down, rise and fall story of big celebrities, the relationships that it set up and explored between objects were not. The BL succeeded, for example, in blurring the relationship between performance and consumption, performer and audience in the exhibition. It actually opened up more fault lines than many of the other exhibitions. The BL included a photo booth using hashtags to crowd source contributions. In the exhibition and in the pop-up shop for example, people swapped stories with those standing next to them. A wall of 7" single covers tempted us all to play collectors' bingo, map the motifs and style codes of punk graphics, and also to be confronted by what it means to see something you own in your own home in the privileged status of a national collection.

There is a power in the punk story when it challenges the location of authority. There is, after all, 'no authority but yourself' in punk rock history. The curator, the story teller, the viewer are all part of a historical conversation, whether they know it or not. Alongside the growth of punk heritage, there has been a growth of academic punk research. There is a growing collective identity of punk scholars, 'punkademics', researchers in punk who are thinking about punk as a process and a way of working as much as an object of study.¹⁵ There is a dedicated academic journal, *Punk and Post-Punk*, as well as projects connected to a more recognisable DIY ethos such as Mike Dines' and Greg Bull's series of publications combining life history with creative practices or *The Truth of Revolution Brother* which uses oral histories as philosophy and was crowd funded to the tune of over £21,000.¹⁶ This doesn't just mean work that is 'about' punk. Sociologists, and historians, for example have been

¹⁵ See for example KISMIF (Keep It Simple Make It Fast) Porto, The Punk Scholars Network, and The Interdisciplinary Network for the Study of Subcultures, Popular Music and Social Change both based in the UK.

¹⁶ Greg Bull and Mike Dines, (eds) *Not Just Bits of Paper* (CreateSpace, 2014). Greg Bull and Mike Dines, (eds) *Tales from the Punkside* (CreateSpace, 2014). Greg Bull and Mike Dines, (eds) *Some of Us Scream, Some of Us Shout* (CreateSpace, 2016). Lisa Sofianos, Robin Ryde, and Charlie Waterhouse, (eds) *The Truth of Revolution, Brother* (Situation Press, 2015).

thinking about what punk as a process might mean for their discipline.¹⁷ There is growing literature on what punk pedagogy could bring to the current academic context, for example.¹⁸ Being a punk scholar means acknowledging the paradoxes of that position. Neither have any business with each other. There are wider lessons to be learnt from this recent, somewhat self-referential work, on what it means to be a punk scholar. It can help us to understand the uncomfortableness of authorised narratives of experiences more generally, and to recognise ways in which exhibitions like that at the BL have found ways to include that itchiness in their exhibition space. Two lessons – the relationship between silences and gaps in heritage narratives and the experiences of those who are being represented, and in corollary, the importance of history as an uncomfortable itchy process – punk has a lot to teach us about the possibilities gained by being in the wrong place.

Of course the British Library exhibition was in the wrong place. That's what made it so punk rock. Punk was always in the wrong place. As soon as punk was visible it was a sell-out. As the school boy awkwardness of the Pistols swearing on the Grundy show, or entertaining the children of striking firefighters at a Christmas party showed, punk was always in the wrong place. There can't be a right way of presented punk because punk is a paradox.¹⁹ Punk combined rhetorics of nihilism and idealism, in its competing values of commodity and authenticity, and in its position across DIY cultures and the market.

Punk London was a paradox, The events were endorsed by the heritage minister David Evennett, Boris Johnson as Mayor of London and, according to press reports, had Her

¹⁷ David Beer, *Punk sociology* (Springer, 2014). Zack Furness, (ed) *Punkademics, The basement show in the ivory tower* (Wivenhoe, Minor Compositions, 2012). Jon Garland, Jon, et al. 'Youth Culture, Popular Music and the End of 'Consensus' in Post-War Britain.' *Contemporary British History* 26.3 (2012), 265-271.

¹⁸ Tom Parkinson, 'Being punk in higher education, subcultural strategies for academic practice' *Teaching in Higher Education*, 22,2 (2017), 143-157.

¹⁹ K Spring, and L. Mayton 'The Paradox of Punk', *International Journal of Education and Social Science*, 2,10 (2015), 56-65.

Majesty the Queen's personal approval. Ex-Sex Pistol, Paul Cook told *The Spectator* that the British Library exhibition fitted right in with his version of punk. 'Would Malcolm be turning in his grave? Would he hell! He'd be too busy organising the 50th anniversary at the V&A'.²⁰ But the counter reaction to *Punk London* was also part of its story, incorporated back into exhibitions and publicity. Its official listings calendar included John Corré's announcement that he would burn £5 million of original Sex Pistols memorabilia in protest at the complacency around punk nostalgia and heritage. Despite Cook's reading of McLaren's likely response, Corré – the son of Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood – argued that Punk had become a brand like McDonald's, at the point in time when we most need a social movement.²¹ Punk's paradox was always part of its story, so it is fitting that Corré's counter narrative critiquing appropriation should be appropriated back.

A similar dynamic can be seen in the incorporation of a gendered critique of the exhibition. The story of punk has often been dominated by the boys, particularly by boys who then congratulate themselves for letting girls get on stage at all. The marginalisation of women in the scene co-existed with the opportunities that punk did provide for women. It is understandable, then, that the historical narratives around punk simultaneously provide a space for the stories of women punk, but often in ways that reiterate their historical marginalisation. There certainly was some inclusion of women's experiences of punk in the British Library exhibit, notably the chance to watch a work-in-progress documentary *Stories from the She Punks* in one of the viewing booths. The pop-up shop sold badge collections of punk women icons and marketed its own bit of self-critique by selling T-shirts with the words 'Girls Invented Punk Rock, Not England' as worn by Sonic Youth's Kim Gordon.

²⁰ Paul Cook, (2016) 'Nothing Sacrilegious about this British Library Punk show', *The Spectator* (28/05/16)

²¹ Luke Morgan Britton, 'John Lydon slams son of Sex Pistols manager for burning £5 million of punk memorabilia', *NME* (20/05/16).

Viv Albertine, member of the feminist punk band The Slits, had been touring literary events and music discussions asserting the importance of the forgotten experiences of female punks since the publication of her memoirs in 2014.²² She spoke at a British Library Punk.London event alongside Jon Savage, punk journalist and donor of many of the archival pieces used. Albertine challenged the exhibition's male-centred focus on the Pistols and the erasure of women's bands from the British Library's story. She used an established punk stalwart, graffiti, and literally challenged the narrative. Although women appear in the exhibition itself, the large information boards that summarized the history of punk for the uninformed visitor at the library did not mention a single female performer. Albertine took her sharpie pen and crossed out the words 'Sex Pistols, the Clash and Buzzcocks', and replaced them with the female-led punk performers 'The Slits, X-Ray Spex and Siouxsie Sioux'. She transposed every mention of the Pistols with her own band's name. 'What about the women?' she wrote. Albertine produced a classic feminist recentred reading of the punk cannon. Lydon's graffiti in Denmark St may now be an official heritage site, but Albertine actively intervened in the politics of representation today, in a way that fully acknowledged the significance of turning your own words into heritage. (She signed her graffiti as if signing a copy of her memoirs for a fan). The British Library couldn't necessarily resolve the paradox of the marginalisation of women in both the scene and its historical representation, but it did the punk rock thing by exposing the process instead. Albertine's writing became part of the exhibition.

The British Library exhibition and anniversary more generally taught me a useful lesson about both punk and about heritage. It is ok to be uncomfortable. Of course punk heritage is a

²² Viv Albertine, *Clothes, Clothes, Clothes. Music, Music, Music. Boys, Boys, Boys: A Memoir* (Macmillan, 2014).

paradox, punkademics are a paradox. That's the point. Punk 40 has reminded us as historians, that we can cope with the uncomfortable. We should be in the wrong place.

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