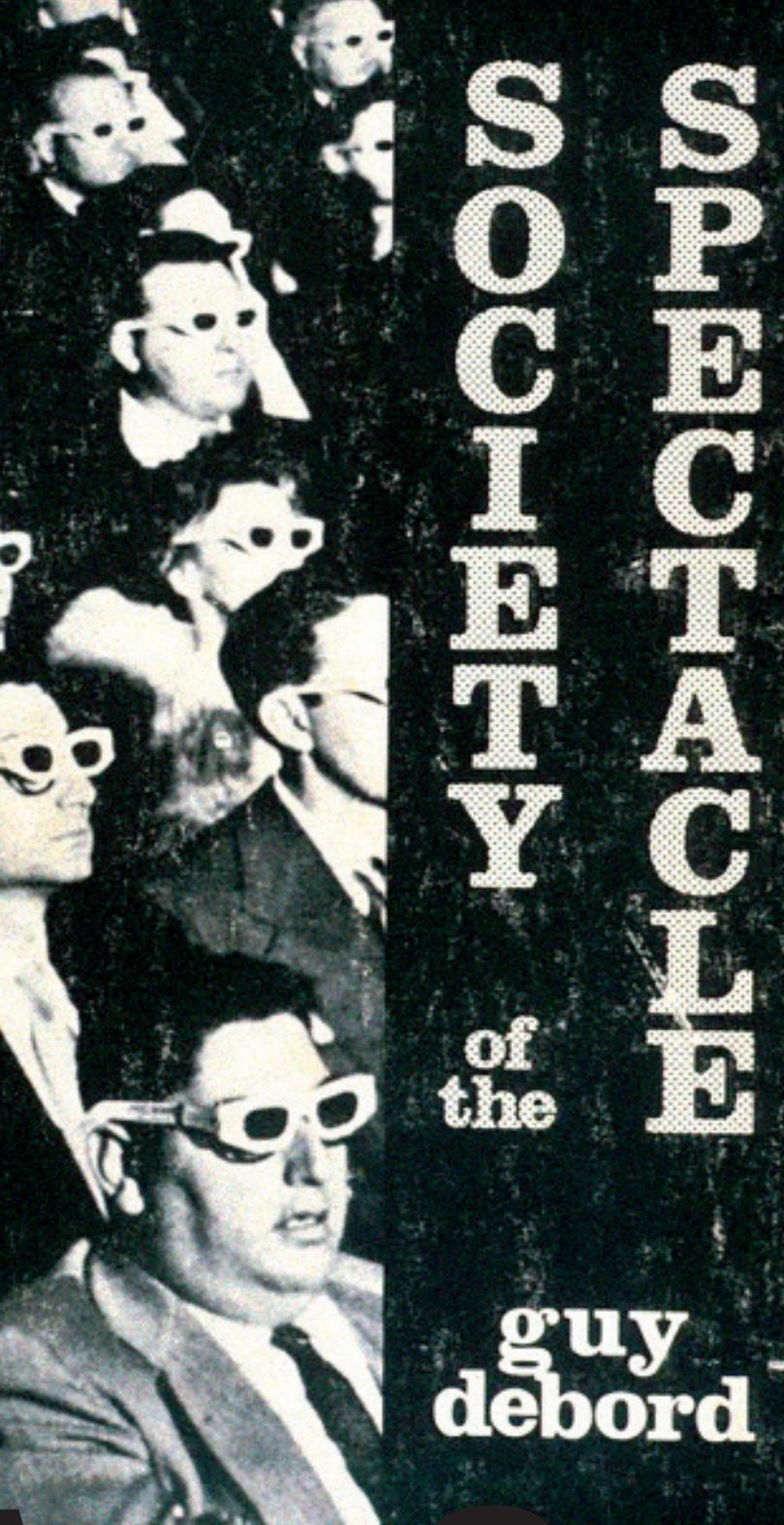


'Punk', the word itself, is impactful and onomatopoeic. It suggests rebellion, anarchy and freedom. The inherent aggression of the word is similar to that of 'bang' or 'whack' – words which one is inclined to enunciate with vehemence. But what springs to your mind when you think of punk? Back-to-basics rock'n'roll? An anarchic movement of individuals rejecting the cultural mainstream? The twin embrace of nihilism and hedonism? Or, wonders Lara Monro, is there much more to it, a deeper impact that has its roots in earlier examples of societal subversion but which continues to impinge critically on cultural producers, four decades after the Sex Pistols first put the British establishment in a cold sweat?

A R T  
A T T A





Behind the façade of the word ‘punk’, and the variegated meaning it has taken on over the last 40 years, there remains a generation that felt compelled to question the systems and beliefs that had cohered in Britain as ’60s counterculture optimism inexorably ossified into dreary ’70s pessimism; a generation whose desire for change would challenge the social constructs that defined ‘the norm’ across music, art, politics, fashion, beauty and sexuality.

Whenever there is political upheaval, revolt and change, new art surfaces that reflects the times. Punk’s fledgling noise was made not in Great Britain but in Lower Manhattan, in the mid-to-late 1970s. A reaction to the apparent closed shop of US major record labels, a new wave of DIY music would cohere around dive-bar venues, notably CBGB, on the then desolate, dangerous Bowery, with a diverse tranche of impoverished but creatively courageous groups, including the Ramones, Television, the Patti Smith Group and Blondie, carving out their own autonomous urban scene. The Ramones’ simplistic but visceral, over-amped bubblegum rock sound would subsequently become the template for UK punk, just as the spiked hair and shredded clothing of Television bassist Richard Hell would provide the model for the UK punk look.

The roots of punk go much further back than that, however. Andrew Hussey, Professor of Cultural History at the School of Advanced Study, University of London, is a respected academic who credits the Situationists and their theories for introducing the ‘real’ politics into punk. A movement of intellectuals and artists in Paris between 1957–1972, the Situationist International was spearheaded by artist, writer, filmmaker, Letterist and Marxist theorist Guy Debord. As a group, the Situationists believed in cultural subversion and changing the world through art and ideas. Their influence was most evident in the Paris *événements* of May 1968, a violent street campaign fought by the left against the very notion of capitalism, consumerism and the values and order of traditional institutions.

Through their journal, *Internationale Situationniste*, the move-

A C K S

**Valie Export**

*Action Pants, Genital Panic* [Pantalones en acción, pánico genital], 1969  
 Cortesía de la Colección Fundación ARCO – IFEMA  
 Archivo fotográfico CA2M ©Andrés Arranz



ment advanced their critique of capitalist culture and urban life as embodied by the stereotyped and often exaggerated images within the mass media and advertising. The group wanted to overrule this idea of the 'spectacle'. As they state in their manifesto from 1960; "Down with the spectacle – commodity society." Moreover, they promoted the importance of the individual and of the creative outlet art can bring for the masses: "The role of the Situationist, the amateur expert, the anti-specialist, will remain a form of specialisation, until the moment of economic and mental abundance when everyone will become 'an artist'... "everyone will construct his own life."

Debord and his followers wanted to turn the traditional view of art on its head. Debunking the superiority and exclusiveness that was seen as the preserve of the privileged academic or 'genius', their aim was to promote inclusivity. Their idea of making daily life a creative, continuously original experience can be seen in much of the art that started to emerge in Europe during the 1960s. It embodied a DIY ethos and embraced the haphazard, transforming the everyday object into one with a specific aesthetic

value. Similarly, non conformity, direct action and not selling out were punk's order of the day, and were expressed in the ways that punks chose to assemble their material. Take punk fashion: different unrelated objects would be placed together to form an overall garment. Random metal objects and cutouts of fabric attached to leather biker jackets or old school blazers; long metal chains attached to tartan jeans and pins, buttons and explicit images or shirts emblazoned with provocative words or slogans.

This assembling of different items to produce an overall image could arguably be described as a form of collage. In this respect there is a link to be found with some of the art that was appearing at the turn of the 20th century. In 1912, Pablo Picasso created 'Still Life with Chair Caning', an oval composition which became a turning point in art history. Through his inclusion of rope (as the border) and oil cloth (as part of the composition), Picasso introduced 'low' materials to the realm of 'high' art, and, ultimately, created what we now understand to be collage. In so doing, Picasso changed the way in which we determine what can and cannot be considered as art.

Like most subcultures and movements that initially survived on the margins of society, and took pride in so doing, punk has been inexorably adapted, adopted and accepted by mainstream culture. It made the news headlines earlier this year, following the launch of *Punk London*, a year-long programme celebrating the 40th anniversary of punk's genesis. The programme was criticised by Joe Corre, son of fashion designer Vivienne Westwood and the Sex Pistols' late manager, Malcolm McLaren. Corre has publicly announced that he will burn his collection of punk memorabilia. His reason? The programme has been publicly backed by the Queen and former London mayor Boris Johnson and has also received a £99,000 grant from the Heritage London Fund. As Corre stated: "The Queen giving in 2016, the year of punk, her official blessing is the most frightening thing I've ever heard. Talk about alternative and punk culture being appropriated by the mainstream. Rather than a movement for change, punk has become like a fucking museum piece or a tribute act."

Corre's act of defiance is just one aspect of the movement's appropriations by the mainstream. The collection itself is worth an estimated five million pounds. Furthermore, one only need type into Google "Jamie Reid artwork for sale" and images of his famous 'God Save the Queen' poster and record sleeve prints will appear, with price tags ranging from hundreds to thousands of pounds.

The relationship between punk and contemporary culture continues to be discussed. One such commentator is author and music journalist Greil Marcus, known for his columns in *Rolling Stone* and other publications such as *Artforum* and *Village Voice*,



Tracey Emin  
*I've got it all*, 2000  
 © Tracey Emin. All rights reserved, DACS 2016. Courtesy White Cube

as well as best-selling books on everyone from Elvis to The Band. Marcus places rock within a broader cultural and political framework. In 1989, he published *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the 20th Century*. This work was informed by Marcus' interest in the Sex Pistols and the source of their anarchic attitude. It is not merely an exploration into the cultural antecedents of punk but as much an exploration of the importance of a common voice. As described in the Harvard University Press Review of *Lipstick Traces*, Marcus identifies the fact that, "Various kinds of angry, absolute demands—demands on society, art, and all the governing structures of everyday life—seem to be coded in phrases, images, and actions passed on invisibly, but inevitably, by people quite unaware of each other."

*Lipstick Traces* is referenced in the exhibition *Punk. Its Traces in Contemporary Art*, first shown last year in Madrid at the Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo and currently being exhibited at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Barcelona (MACABA). The show highlights the attitudes that punk has instilled in artists of today. Amongst

the exhibitors are Tracey Emin (*I've Got it All*, 2000) and Gavin Turk (*Pop*, 2000), both, of course, renowned for their inclusion in the YBA movement in London during the 1990s – itself a sort of fine art version of punk. Others include Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy, who were actively creating during the explosion of the punk scene in the '70s and '80s. As stated by MACABA, the works exhibited explore themes that include: "noise, denial, violence, nihilism and sexuality. Dissatisfaction, nonconformity, the loss of faith in progress and a fierce criticism of the icons of the economic and social system..." At the essence of this show, curated by David G. Torres, is "the aesthetic of the ugly".

There are other artists today whose creative principles link in with punk ideologies. Take Jeremy Deller, winner of the Turner Prize in 2004 and known for his playful yet political collaborations and reenactments. Deller has won praise for humanising his politics through the *Broadside Ballads*, a performance held at the 2015 Venice Biennale. These ballads were originally sung by factory workers in pubs and on the streets at the end of a hard day's



Lipstick Traces Soundtrack  
Accompanying CD to the book by  
Greil Marcus, 1989



work. They were in effect a social critique expressing the hardship of conditions workers endured at the hands of the industrial barons. Journalist David Batty, in an article for *The Guardian*, comments on Deller's use of the ballads, seeing their legacy, "in the observational commentary and humour of popular music, from punk, such as performance."

Deller explores the punk link further by inviting us to observe the social history of Britain through contemporary popular culture. In 2005, he and artist Alan Kane produced *Folk Archive*, a visual account of present day pastimes and pursuits. As an independent artist, Kane questions and plays with the distinction between high art and everyday creativity. Working mainly in photography and installation, he incorporates commonplace objects, transforming them into pieces with artistic value. Assembled over six years, *Folk Archive* brings together drawing, painting, film, performance, costume, decoration and political opinion, as well as humour. The echo of punk's DIY approach is palpable here. As Sam Jacob, columnist for *Art Review*, observes, "Folk can often suggest the mystical or magical. But Alan and Jeremy aren't telling us fairy stories. 'It's Anarchy, not Alchemy' they say."

*Folk Archive* is as much anthropological as it is artistic, thanks to its detailed insight into the diverse range of cultures in contemporary Britain, including everyone from prisoners and the homeless to teenagers and pop fans. As with punk, Deller and Kane

allow for a common voice between the cross section of groups involved in the project.

While punk, and the art that was produced within the subculture during the late 1970s, essentially boycotted the establishment and went against everything that it stood for, it is interesting to see contemporary artists reactions to the choices being put forward by those in power today. During both the run-up to the recent EU referendum and the political uncertainty that has followed the result, rather than promoting the idea of change and independence as a nation, many artists publicly declared their support for remaining in the EU. German fine art photographer Wolfgang Tillmans, for example, launched a social media campaign whose poster 'No Man is an Island' went viral. Damien Hirst used his signature butterflies to post designs on his widely followed Instagram account, supporting the campaign run by We are Europe UK. Even Tracey Emin announced her support for keeping Britain in the EU by signing the Stronger In petition. Ex-punk rockers, like Bob Geldof were even vocally active in their support of the Remain campaign. Perhaps there's irony in the fact that in the 21st century the punk-derived voice of protest, rebellion and autonomy has become so inextricably linked with, and dependant on, the political status quo. Perhaps it's worth asking again, what springs to mind when you think of punk?

# NAN GOLDIN: THE BALLAD OF SEXUAL DEPENDENCY

MoMa, New York

June 11, 2016–February 12, 2017

Born in Washington DC in 1953, photographer Nan Goldin was raised in a middle-class Jewish family in Boston. The rest of her life, as documented through her camera, was a far cry from her suburban childhood. The catalyst for this was, arguably, the death of her older sister and idol, Barbara, who at the age of 19 took her own life by lying across the path of an oncoming commuter train. Having witnessed her sister's rebellion and rejection of middle-class America, although highly traumatic and damaging, Goldin used her death as a signal to make her own way.

By the age of 14 she had left home, and by 15 was using photography as a means of documenting her immersion within marginalised communities. Take, for instance, three of her first black and white photographic subjects – the drag queens Ivy, Naomi and Colette, regulars at Boston's most popular drag bar, The Other Side, taken between 1972 and '74. Goldin attended the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, where she studied alongside the likes of photographer and lifelong friend David Armstrong (1954–2014). Soon after graduating in 1977, Goldin moved to New York, where she began recording the debauched lifestyle of bohemians living on the Lower East side.

Her 'snapshot style' captured real moments, including the ruthless party scene she partook in and its hard-drug taking, as well as the weddings and relationships of close friends. Often associated with the American photographer Diane Arbus (1923–1971), courtesy of their mutual predilection for documenting marginal figures, Goldin rejects the term 'outsider'. Rather, she sees her images, whether of same sex couples in a passionate moment of intimacy, or a heroin needle being injected into a vein, as documenting the lives of her surrogate

family and community. Ultimately, this produces a clarity in her work as the unspoken bond of trust between friends is made visible. Goldin becomes the respected and respectful voyeur, capturing moments that would otherwise be left behind closed doors.

Currently on show at MoMA, New York, is Goldin's *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1979–2004). Originally produced in 1985, the photographic sequence of her signature portraits are presented on 35mm slides, with each image (there are over 700 in total) projected one at a time by a carousel projector. Named after the song 'The Ballad of Sexual Obsession' by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, the 45-minute slideshow is essentially an autobiographical photo journal of Goldin's experiences in Boston, New York, Berlin and elsewhere from the 1970s onwards. A carefully curated soundtrack, ranging from punk to blues and opera, frames the narrative sequence. From nude portraits of females to harsh images of bruised faces exploiting the realities of domestic violence (most notably 'Nan one month after being battered', 1984) to pictures of friends cutting the umbilical cord of their newborns, the viewer is granted intimate access into an era that has dissolved. Essentially, it is the memories captured by artists such as Goldin that allow for these marginalised communities to live on. What's more, *The Ballad...* has become a memento mori as it pays tribute to Goldin's friends and loved ones that passed away, mainly from the AIDS epidemic. These includes photographer Peter Hujar (1984–1987) and artist, poet and political activist David Wojnarowicz (1954–1992).

The poignant yet hard-hitting last few minutes of *The Ballad...* includes images of tombstones and the open casket of



*Nan and Brian in Bed, New York City, 1983*  
Nan Goldin  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the generosity of Jon L. Stryker

actress Cookie Mueller, who passed away from complications from AIDS in 1989, while Dean Martin warbling 'Memories Are Made of This' echoes through the darkened room. With 'The Ballad' one could credit Goldin for producing an overall image that pays homage to the circle of life, with themes of birth, youth, love, relationships, old age and death all delicately touched upon.

By granting access into the promiscuous lives of her 'family', which include her partners, gay, straight and couples as well as solitary figures, Goldin presents viewers with an overwhelmingly powerful visual experience. The 'realness' of her technique has become ubiquitous in the digital age, with our near-universal availability to document every moment with smartphones. Yet Goldin's images manage to maintain their originality and autonomy through their acute awareness and honesty. Each picture from 'The Ballad' is thought-provoking yet bittersweet, helping to preserve memories and individuals while simultaneously acting as a reminder of everything that has been lost. As the artist states in the afterword for 'The Ballad of Sexual Dependency': "I always thought if I photographed anyone or anything enough, I would never lose the memory, I would never lose the place. But these pictures show me how much I've lost."

— LARA MONRO