
Article:
Trowell, I.M. orcid.org/0000-0001-6039-7765 (2018) Exhibition reviews. Punk and Post Punk, 7 (3). pp. 487-492. ISSN 2044-1983

https://doi.org/10.1386/punk.7.3.479_5

Print! Tearing It Up: Independent British magazines changing the word, Somerset House South Wing, 8 June – 22 August, 2018 (free admission)

The Music that Saved a Decade: Divining the eighties underground: Punk & Oi!, hip hop, grindcore, crust and hardcore-house, Barbican Music Library, 14 July – 3 October, 2018 (free admission)

Reviewed by Ian Trowell, Independent Researcher

1970s punk and 1980s post-punk archive fever grips London in the hot summer of 2018 with these two free exhibitions. There is a clear punk moment in the flow of artefacts trapped under the vitrines in *Print!* at Somerset House (a handwritten interview with Iggy Pop by Nick Kent entitled 'the punk messiah of the teenage wasteland' for a 1972 issue of *Frendz*, original editions of Jamie Reid's *Suburban Press* and King Mob material as an insurrectionary precursor, Coum Transmissions ephemera, the hastily assembled Sex Pistols newspaper as a contemporaneous object from the belly of the beast), even though the intent of the exhibition is to examine the broader history of the independent magazine in Britain. More so, a wealth of important material both pre-dating and also emerging directly after punk (post-punk or otherwise) offers the chance for critical reflection, and a subjective reframing of dates, demarcations and relationships between subcultures, countercultures and mainstream culture as set out by the curator Paul Gorman. Meanwhile, the Barbican exhibition attempts to query the whole decade of the 1980s through a punk lens, boldly sailing past the crooked wooden signs hammered into the silted bottom of punk's boating lake in front of narrowing channels of stagnant water and dense overhanging foliage warning you to go no further… where the waters are no longer navigable. This is nominally taken to be 1984, encapsulated by Matthew Worley's definitive punk undertaking *No Future: Punk, Politics and British Youth Culture, 1976-1984*, with Ian Glasper's meticulous documenting of the second wave framed within the shorter interstice of 1980 and 1984. In the Barbican exhibition we relive the mid-1980s period of subcultural music, traditionally framed as a wilderness, and link to the onset of rave with the second summer(s) of love in 1988 and 1989, a new period often framed as a *tabula rasa* in terms of subcultural genealogy and phylogenesis.

Firstly, to Somerset House. *Print!* opened in the South Wing of the Neoclassical palace-turned-public-space, spreading out through three elongated rooms overlooking the River Thames and the tree-lined Victoria Embankment. Set out in a perfunctory manner, with clearly labelled and uncluttered flat display cases and wall displays offering chronological and genre-specific clusters of objects, it resonates in a playfully discomforting sense with the grandiose nature of the space and tactile feeling of walking on the antique parquet floor. Protest zines and the voices of the disenfranchised, subaltern and marginal, for so long labelled mad or dangerous, now gathered in a

privileged space. It is a considered and professionally curated exhibition, with a massive mind-map of publication titles by Paul Gorman occupying the long wall of the second room. The map serves as much as a kind of aesthetic object in the form of a fashionable info-gram as it does as some kind of overarching guide or revelatory subcultural schematic. The final room has a candy-pink mock kiosk with a selection of journals that are included as 'do not touch' objects in the previous two rooms, but are now browsable via lecterns and chains. This final room spills out across an access corridor into a gift-shop space where contemporary print culture can be purchased and a selection of wrapped vintage magazines (such as *The Face*) can be browsed and purchased at hefty prices.

There are a couple of post-punk lead-in tangents to this exhibition to set out, helping to contextualise *Print!* in relation to an interesting – if not overt – punk and post-punk theme and historiographical viewpoint on the subject. Firstly, the recent exhibition *North*, held at Somerset House over the winter of 2017-18 exerts a proximate influence. This exhibition celebrated the North of England as it had influenced photography, art and fashion. Within the many themes and artefacts there was a strong pull from the northern post-punk spaces, particularly around Manchester and Lancashire. Ben Kelly had refabricated the industrial hazard aesthetic and structural pillars from the Hacienda, positioned in the gallery as a synecdoche for the whole club. Belgian avant-garde clothes designer Raf Simons had revisited his A/W 2003-4 collection which consisted of parkas, jackets and sweaters emblazoned with post-punk iconography from Factory Records and the goth band Bauhaus, reproducing a military parka with Peter Saville's cover art for New Order's *Power, Corruption and Lies*, itself plundered from an 1890 Henri Fantin-Latour painting. These objects evoking the early days of Manchester's post-punk prominence were fashionably ethereal or hauntological and not just presented as museum pieces; the designers going back to reinsert them with a prominence that made them now feel out of joint through the pull of the past connotating different futures. Other work in *North* included video projects by Mark Leckey, an artist who plays with the mythopoeic potential of subcultural snippets of films and recovered artefacts (again, he is drawn to recovered Joy Division video fragments).

The second post-punk tangent to *Print!* relates to Paul Gorman. The journalist-turned-curator has always been an avid collector of subcultural ephemera, and his recent move to writing serious coffee-table art books has seen a frequent dalliance with punk and post-punk, predominantly through the lens of fashion and design culture. This mode of approach to punk-via-style imprints upon the exhibition, as the punk heritage objects from the time of Jamie Reid's print activism are supplemented by Gorman's collected features from early 70s semi-mainstream magazines on McLaren and Westwood's roles as fashion provocateurs. Gorman's recent printed output includes a celebration of the designer Barney Bubbles (prominent in the music industry) and a contract with

the arthouse publishers Thames and Hudson to publish histories of the British pop artist Derek Boshier (who designed for David Bowie and the Clash) and the style magazine *The Face*. This latter book (Gorman 2017) is an important but awkward post-punk document, and is central to Gorman's post-punk flow as mapped out in *Print!.* Magazine founder Nick Logan has a history that predates punk lit up by his personal commitment to the mod scene, and *The Face* has a subsequent prominent role in the reiteration and foregrounding of style culture – though an early photograph of Logan at his desk shows him surrounded by clippings from the sprawling extent of the scenes of the time as a kind of post-punk frozen moment: 2-Tone, skinhead, Killing Joke flyer, The Associates….

The impetus for assembling *Print!* is the explosive rise in print over the past decade as the alleged backlash against digital culture takes root and manifests in a multitude of directions. Thus, one aim of the exhibition is to capture, explicate and represent this contemporaneous print splurge, with a parallel aim to render some kind of history of 'progressive and polemical print' in the period before the internet. However, both strands are problematical and subjective. The past decade has seen an endless slew of glossy post-style magazines supported by high-end advertising, offering minimal fare in terms of the progressive and polemical. The current mushrooming of bespoke print culture can be traced back to around 2000 when Magma bookshop opened in Covent Garden, with a focus on the emergent art, design, fashion and street-art magazines. This was the same year that London's most adventurous radical bookshop, Compendium on Camden High Street, closed down; a time when similar bookshops in many cities were failing to meet increasing rent costs as gentrification went rampant. Even if dissident voices were switching to the internet as an added stream for conveying a message and establishing a point of contact, the radical magazine climate through the 1990s had a good mix of 'pro-situ' zines and agitational political newspapers such as *Class War* with its legendary and incendiary cover designs. None of this material makes it into the exhibition, and instead the period between punk's approach and heyday (mid to late 1970s) and print culture's dwindling to almost nothing due to the availability of the internet (late 1990s) is predominantly occupied by the early 1980s birth of the style magazine. A smattering of contributions from John May's Counterculture Collection gives a trace thread between the agitational 1960s and 1970s angry voices opening out into new single or specific issues (Ireland, animal rights, women's issues, prisoner support) and the post-punk era of protest through selected themes such as Greenham Common, but the central seam of the exhibition hovers over style culture. These magazines –*The Face*, *i-D*, *Smash Hits*, *Blitz* and *Dazed and Confused* – have their roots in coverage of the image-centred scenes (bands, fans and increasingly club spaces) following the spiralling of post-punk opportunism as many bands (and ex-punk entrepreneurs) took advantage of a lapse in the shelf-life of a naff new wave and a limited market for second wave punk, storming the barricades of the charts with new pop. My

own reading of the 'post' in post-punk is not a temporal demarcation (such as in post-war); instead it implies music that is inspired by, made possible by, responds to, or is a clear 'tweaking' of sound, style, structure or gesture (in that the same way the post in postmodern encomapsses a reflective reconsideration of modernism and is not just something that comes after it). *Print!*, presumably under Gorman's guidance, situates a version of post-punk clearly as a style-led culture and so makes it concomitant with the switch to glossy style magazines, moving later into titles such as *Sleaze Nation* with their corporate-ironic strategies where the idea was to seek the cool, the ironic and the hip through a critical stance, paving the way for the hipster scene via the television character Nathan Barley. Within this surplus of surface over depth there are moments of nostalgic humour, not least the cover of the first issue of *Smash Hits* from 1978 offering the chance to win ten copies of the new Plastic Bertrand album.

In this way, *Print!* could be interpreted as offering up punk as a pivot or switchback moment, where the subaltern voices, sounds and modes of comportment, argot and dress from the 1960s and 1970s (seen in the exhibition through material such as *Oz* and *International Times*) are intensified into a momentary exemplar of visual culture conjured up by Westwood-McLaren-Reid, leading to the deluge of style magazines pioneered and populated by the post-punk, new-pop movers and shakers. This was reflected in the choice of the panel discussion for the opening event which included style historian Peter York and editor of *Blitz* magazine Iain R. Webb.

The Barbican Centre is in high contrast to Somerset House, both in terms of the building and the post-punk exhibition. The brutalist residential towers loom into view, and the arts centre itself shares the same tooled-concrete aesthetic with stepped exterior spaces recalling the dystopian scenes from Kubrick's 1971 film *A Clockwork Orange*. On the day of my visit any concerns about being hijacked by droogs was dispelled by a feverish graduation underway, and the slick, monetised machinery of champagne cocktails and photographic rituals was in overdrive. The interior of the Barbican is equally brutal and futuristic, resembling a concrete cast 1970s sci-fi spaceship (*Blake's 7* 'Liberator' maybe).

The exhibition *The Music that Saved a Decade* was situated in the music library, a free public resource that has a small space for exhibition around the main library counter. The library puts on four exhibitions per year, and this exhibition was curated by library-user Oliver Bradbury. There was no official brochure to the exhibition, only an A5 paper flyer that appeared to be made by the curator and conveyed a lengthy text trying to summarise the work with an action-posed photograph of Amebix guitarist and co-founder Stig C Miller. The absence of any biographical material akin to Gorman's past in the *Print!* exhibition suggested that Bradbury was passionately recalling the scope

and content of the exhibition as an engaged participant, and helpful library staff confirmed this was his first attempt at presenting historical resources.

The exhibition area consisted of wall space and four adjoining vitrines with listening points, and two further central vitrines either side of a concrete pillar (which was used for further information displays). Whilst there has been a much-welcomed and concerted effort in the museum sector to challenge the hegemonic constraints of what can be said, about which objects, and by whom, leading to 'new museology' and a deliberate affront to 'authorised heritage discourse', there was (for me) a serious breakdown in the conveyance of both the spirit of the exhibition and its specific facets of information. The display boards featured an overloading of text as a single stream, like spatially expanded pages of a book. However, the text was not set at a suitable size, the font itself was not well chosen and did not facilitate reading since the line length was far too long, and the whole was printed on bright yellow vinyl.

Whilst the reading of the dense text was hard work in terms of tracking the words and lines, the text itself as a coherent thread was even more challenging. This linked back to Bradbury's overarching vision of how the 1980s commenced with various punk threads (original punk, second wave UK82 punk, anarcho-punk) and such music gave both impetus and a way of understanding the key years of 1982 (Oi!), 1984 (hip hop), 1987 (crust or grindcore), and 1989 (hardcore-house). What you were presented with in the dense paragraphs were personal experiences and interpretations, facts from a multitude of sources, intense moments where Bradbury tried to segue together disparate music scenes, and sections of self-questioning and doubting of his own ideas. In an unintentional parallel to *Print!* and its stated aim to celebrate reclaiming life after the internet, Bradbury had evoked the spirit of the early internet when densely packed and apparently endless tracts were hosted on geocities pages and early blogging software.

Bradbury is aware of the short shrift that the mid-1980s gets in terms of musical innovation, and he seems determined to do justice to what is evidently his time in music consumption and living within a scene anchored by various people moving through divergent music genres. There is a constant feeling in the text of a forward motion of the self, that is Bradbury's diaristic and auto-ethnographical dynamic. This recollection of directly living the musical 1980s, and trying to retrospectively apply a coherent thread that commences with the sprinkling of the magic-dust of anarcho-punk, diverts into sections of text (and a small number of minutely reproduced photographs) recalling squatted spaces in Bath and London, and peripheral characters like the infamous 'Hackney Hell Crew'. Even when considering the early hardcore-house scene, Bradbury channels Foucault the (counter) archivist and seeks out the overlooked, offering a potted history of

spaces like the Thunderdome in Manchester, a rough-and-ready rave venue that has been airbrushed out of the city's history in the post-Hacienda era. There are interesting and clearly under-represented stories and scenes throughout Bradbury's huge monologue, but its hard to chase them down and let them breathe. Also, an attempt to unpack and critically engage Bradbury's overarching grand narrative, a vision and version of post-punk that could be read as a staunch defence of something intrinsically linked in spirit and form to punk, is difficult to engage due to impenetrability of the text (as both readable and coherent).

The vitrines were also unorthodox, resembling the early German *wunderkammern* (the cabinet of curiosities precursor to formal pedagogical museum displays) where souvenirs were densely packed on display. As with the *Print!* exhibition, these were paper-based artefacts such as gig flyers, record sleeves, newspaper cuttings and other ephemera, but rather than them being set out in a grid there was a frozen tableau capturing the bedroom floor after a late night session, a stratigraphy of punk and post-punk effects. It gave the impression of alternative universe post-punk Madame Tussauds, rather than a formal museum space. The inclusion of beer cans only added to this strange effect.

On reflection, after seeing these exhibitions on the same day, there is a strained dialogue between them, almost a dialectic or chiastic statement that addresses the subject of presentation and the presentation of the subject. An unstated narrative emerges out of *Print!* by virtue of the clean and segmented layout, whilst Bradbury's impassioned narrative is lost amidst the chaotic and overloaded presentation. Two overlapping exhibitions, curatorially diverse but covering the same period of what might be nominated the same scene (punk and post-punk), raising questions with regard to contextualisation and temporal compartmentalisation, and offering attempts to create very personal narratives of sense-making that diverge diametrically.

References

Glasper, Ian (2004), *Burning Britain: The History of UK Punk 1980-1984*, London: Cherry Red.

Gorman, Paul (2017), *The Story of The Face: The Magazine that Changed Culture*, London: Thames and Hudson.

Worley, Matthew (2017), *No Future: Punk, Politics and British Youth Culture, 1976-1984*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Contact:

E-mail: imtrowell@outlook.com