

“Andy was my baby cousin, he came to stay with me in London every summer. I had taken him to see the Adverts, Siouxsie & the Banshees, Johnny Moped and Generation X during the summer of 1977 (he was sixteen), he helped me around the shop and went to every concert he could get to by public transport in the evenings. In my shop, he mixed with Don Letts and Jeanette Lee, sold a pair of brothel creepers to Sid Vicious, and dressed Rudolph Nureyev. He didn't go for a punk look, he was too self-conscious, but he was mesmerized by the scene and lived and breathed it. He was looking for artifacts from the get-go; I don't want to think where he got the money to buy the stuff. He was known in all the record stalls on Portobello Road.

For me, it was all fog of war, struggling to keep my head above water while fighting my landlord, my bank manager, the Metropolitan Police, and football hooligans every Saturday that Chelsea was playing at home. But for Andy it was a treasure hunt, pure and simple. I think he had a wonderful time of it... Anyway, Andy was there.”

John Krivine on Andrew Krivine

Pretty Vacant: the Graphic Language of Punk



“Now form a band” A Punk Exhibition in 3 Chords



September 10 – December 11, 2021

Binghamton University Art Museum

Before it became commodified into a mishmash of safety pins and mohawks, punk was embodied by a democratic, do-it-yourself attitude and a loathing of commercial slickness. Its fashion made tangible the concept of alienation. Its graphic design expressed a wide range of influences from Dada, to the Situationists, to Constructivism, using pastiche and appropriation to reflect the punk mode of anti-aesthetics. Its music used gutter-snipe rhetoric, a three-chord “lack of technique” and spontaneous performance to puncture and undercut the intellectual posturing, poetry, complexity and big-studio production of rock. That punk caught on during a ballooning economic crisis in the West is no coincidence. The recession, poverty and political turmoil of the 1970s led this working-class youth subculture to reject hippie optimism and glam-rock decadence in favor of a gritty, angry expression that Dick Hebdige called “an oblique challenge to hegemony.”

This exhibition centers on Andrew Krivine’s vast collection of punk ephemera, through three different foci: Jamie Reid and the Suburban Press; women and punk; and the fashions of London’s punk scene seen through the boutiques BOY and SEX, also featuring photographs by Sheila Rock. The title of the exhibition is inspired by a 1977 drawing included in the first issue of Tony Moon’s fanzine *Sideburns* #1, originally created just to fill space in the zine. Now seen as one of the iconic expressions of the punk ethos, it was an impetus to just do something, Moon notes, “You didn’t need to have been to music school or be particularly proficient or skilled. It was much more about the energy and drive to do something. It’s a rallying call to the troops.”

A NOTE ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

While it is undeniable that provocation was an important component of punk culture, it sometimes went so far as to appropriate Nazi insignia, for example, some Seditious’ t-shirts, as well as Siouxsie Sioux and Sid Vicious wearing swastikas in public. We made the curatorial decision not to include these materials in this exhibition. The shock of the Nazi insignia is particularly disturbing today because of its reincorporation into contemporary xenophobic political movements.

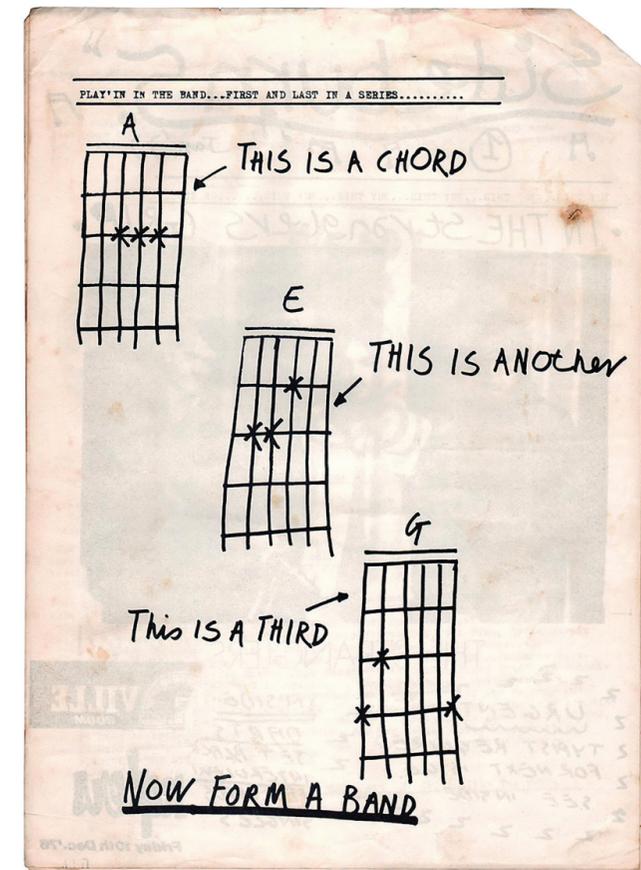
Some members of punk culture also identified with the emerging skinhead movement, connected to the rise in racist violence in the UK and US in the 1970s. To their credit, some musicians took an active anti-facist and anti-racist stance in their music and political organizing, including the formation of Rock Against Racism (1976–1981). Creating zines and organizing concerts in direct opposition to the rising tide of far-right politics in the UK, Rock Against Racism was influential in exemplifying how music and culture can be used to educate the public on political issues.

We will grapple with the ways that racism and homophobia percolated through some aspects of punk culture through a screening and discussion of Vaginal Davis’ *The White to Be Angry* (1999), in collaboration with the Harpur Cinema Series.

—Claire L. Kovacs, Curator of Collections & Exhibitions

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