

# The Art of the Enfants Terribles: Infantilism and Dilettantism in Punk Art

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## **Abstract**

Punk was visual as much as it was musical. In recent years, art historical research of punk works of art has increased. However, a thorough analysis of punk art's themes, motifs, and methods is still lacking. This article examines infantilism and dilettantism as two key notions within punk art, as illustrated by the collage *L'ecole de l'art infantile* (COUM Transmissions, 1974) and the super 8 film *Das Leben des Sid Vicious* (Die Tödliche Doris, 1981). Analysis shows how concepts of childishness, nonconformism and anti-authoritarianism are interconnected both with punk's DIY ethos and its self-identification as a youth movement. Furthermore, the article discusses punk art's circumvention of antithetical concepts, such as failure vs. success, innocence vs. guilt, reality vs. fantasy, skill vs. incompetence.

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## **Introduction**

[1] In 1979, young punks who had run away from home came to Gallery ANUS to get help with filling out administrative documents for the authorities; ANUS was

an artists' gallery with walk-in social counseling for kids.<sup>1</sup> The rooms of the gallery were part of a squatted house in the Sarphatistraat, Amsterdam, and were collectively used as workshop, community space, art gallery, and zine shop. This mixture was typical of the punk movement, which often united the artistic and the social. For many very young punks, spaces such as Gallery ANUS represented a refuge in a hostile society. It was a place of resistance; it was a place of Do It Yourself (DIY) in both art and life. Such interconnections between artistic strategies, lifestyles, and criticism of the system can be exemplarily observed in the two notions that are the focus of this article: dilettantism and infantilism. Furthermore, the concept of the ANUS gallery points to punk's self-definition as a movement of the youth and outsiders.

[2] Punk was (or is) "a minority culture for outcasts, for those willing to make and live in their own embattled but special world, for those who didn't fit into society or who saw society as unfit for themselves", Greil Marcus explains.<sup>2</sup> There is a strong sense of solidarity with anyone outside the norm, and children, not yet shaped by society's expectations, became a symbol of this. There is also a strong sense of children banding together in opposition to the grown-up world. "If the kids are united / then we'll never be divided", the English punk band Sham 69 sang.<sup>3</sup> "We're not just a band, we're a gang. Like the *Dead End Kids* of today",<sup>4</sup> drummer Jerry Nolan of the New York Dolls said, citing the stage play about a group of youths growing up on the streets of New York during the Great Depression. In the poem *Revolt*, Danish punk poet Michael Strunge wrote: "And the children run riot / like flowers in the light / their game captures the boring houses / with indecent hair styles and costumes."<sup>5</sup> It is a revolution through play, but an agonizingly vulnerable one.

[3] Such concepts of youth and opposition, play and pain, autonomy and unity are at the heart of this survey. Furthermore, these few examples alone outline what was inherent to the punk movement from the outset: Punk was an attitude, not a specific art or music or lyric form. Though intermedia performances and collaborations between visual artists, poets, and musicians had flourished in the 1960s – think Andy Warhol and the Velvet Underground, Yoko Ono, Brian Eno, Mike Kelley's *Destroy All Monsters*, to name but a few – the degree of art forms'

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<sup>1</sup> See Jeannette Dekeukeleire and Harry Ruhé, *Punk in Holland: God Shave the Queen*, Amsterdam 2011, n. p.

<sup>2</sup> Greil Marcus, "Punk (1979)" [first published in: *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll*, ed. Jim Miller, New York 1979], <https://greilmarcus.net/2014/09/08/punk-1979> (accessed 17 December 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Sham 69, *If the Kids Are United* (Polydor 1978).

<sup>4</sup> Jerry Nolan, quoted in *Beaver County Times*, 20 February 1974, 14.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Strunge, *Revolt* [1981], in: Michael Strunge, *A Virgin from a Chilly Decade*, transl. Bente Elsworth, Todmorden 2000, 41.

fusion reached a new high in punk. Nonetheless, punk is often perfunctorily associated only with its musical and fashion outbursts in New York in 1975 and London in 1976. The phenomenon of punk, however, merits a much broader understanding regarding its time frame, geographical reach, and the variety of its expressions. This (re)assessment includes the notion that punk, as Gerald Matt formulates it, manifested "differently yet consistently"<sup>6</sup> in different cultural spheres, and, relatedly, the recognition that punk is deeply embedded in its pre- and post-notions (new wave, no wave, dark wave, industrial, hardcore, queercore, etc.). Furthermore, collective structures (artists groups and bands) are pronounced within punk art as well as within punk music.<sup>7</sup>

[4] In comparison to music, social, and cultural studies, the exploration of punk is relatively new within art history.<sup>8</sup> This article therefore begins with a (very) short introduction to punk art, and then seeks to examine the significance and interconnectedness of two key notions – dilettantism and infantilism – within punk art and to juxtapose this double case study with Dada and Surrealist positions, as the most relevant art historical precursors in this case. Two paradigmatic artworks by artists who are associated with punk are then considered in-depth: the collage *L'école de l'art infantile (The School of Infantile Art, 1974)* by the English group COUM Transmissions and the super 8 film *Das Leben des Sid Vicious (The Life of Sid Vicious, 1981)* by the West German group Die Tödliche Doris (that is, The Deadly Doris). The results of the artworks' analyses are subsequently discussed in relation to a broader perspective on infantilism and dilettantism (and their entangled meanings) in punk.

## Punk Art Complex

[5] "What is punk art?", asks Glenn O'Brien in the 2008 exhibition catalogue *No One Is Innocent: Kunst – Stil – Revolte*. "That is about as difficult to answer as the question what is punk music, and even more subtle, even more elusive. But no

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<sup>6</sup> Gerald Matt, "Vorwort", in: *Punk: No One Is Innocent. Kunst – Stil – Revolte*, exh. cat. Kunsthalle Wien, eds. Gerald Matt and Thomas Mießgang, Nuremberg 2008, 7.

<sup>7</sup> The author recently submitted her PhD thesis *PUNK ART: An Exploration. Four Case Studies from London, West Berlin, Amsterdam, and Copenhagen, 1974–1984*, in which these topics are extensively addressed.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Mark Sladen and Ariella Yedgar, eds., *Panic Attack! Art in the Punk Years*, London 2007; *Punk: No One Is Innocent. Kunst – Stil – Revolte*, exh. cat. Kunsthalle Wien, eds. Gerald Matt and Thomas Mießgang, Nuremberg 2008; Éric de Chassesey, ed., *Europunk: The Visual Culture of Punk in Europe [1976–1980]*, Rome 2011; Johan Kugelberg and Jon Savage, *Punk: An Aesthetic*, New York 2012; Adam Lerner and Steven Wolf chaired a session on "Punk Rock and Contemporary Art on the West Coast" at the Los Angeles College Art Association conference, 23 February 2012; David G. Torres, ed., *Punk: sus rastros en el arte contemporáneo / Punk: Its Traces in Contemporary Art*, Barcelona 2016.

matter what punk rock was, it had [...] a whole lot to do with art."<sup>9</sup> That punk had a whole lot to do with art is an insight which has only found its way into institutionalized art history in the last decade approximately, but which was very present in the mid-1970s to mid-1980s. Bettie Ringma and Marc H. Miller used the term "punk art" in their *Punk Art Exhibition* at the Washington Project for the Arts in Washington and the School of Visual Arts in New York in 1978 (fig. 1).<sup>10</sup> Likewise, the protagonists of the already-mentioned ANUS gallery in Amsterdam described their work as "punk art" on flyers and posters in 1979.<sup>11</sup> A few years later, Bill Gaglione wrote about his art zine: "The aim of *Dadazine* is to publish the art and artists of the neo-avant-garde: Dada, Correspondence Art, Fluxus, Concretism, Lettrism, Conceptual Art, Bruitism, Simultaneous Poetry, Happenings/Events, *Punk Art*, etc."<sup>12</sup>



1 Catalogue of the *Punk Art Exhibition*, Washington Project for the Arts, Washington DC, 15 May to 10 June 1978. (Left) Front cover: Marc H. Miller, Bettie Ringma, and Curt Hoppe, *Smashed Mona*, 1978. (Right) Back cover: Scott B & Beth B, *Max Karl*, 1978 (courtesy Marc H. Miller / <http://gallery.98Bowery.com>)

[6] However, "punk art" never did become an established term and, presumably, most protagonists of the scene never wanted it to become one. After all, punk art

<sup>9</sup> Glenn O'Brien, "Punk is New York, New York is Punk", in: *Punk: No One Is Innocent. Kunst - Stil - Revolte*, exh. cat. Kunsthalle Wien, eds. Gerald Matt and Thomas Mießgang, Nuremberg 2008, 94-99: 94. Unless otherwise noted, all translations into English are by the author.

<sup>10</sup> Marc H. Miller, "Punk Art Exhibition - The Catalogue. Washington Project for The Arts, Washington, DC, 1978", <http://98bowery.com/punk-years/punk-art-catalogue.php> (accessed 16 December 2017).

<sup>11</sup> See Dekeukeleire and Ruhé, *Punk in Holland*, n. p.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Crane and Mary Stofflet, eds., *Correspondence Art*, San Francisco 1984, 493; emphasis added by the author.

was in many ways anti-art. The artists involved in punk sought to avoid the predestined canonization habitually and historically looming over the avant-garde. The French art/punk group Bazooka declared: "Mon papi s'appelle art moderne / Mais je ferai mieux que lui" ("My daddy is called modern art / But I will do better than him").<sup>13</sup> That statement might be read as a sideswipe at the predominant maleness and occasional father-figure-esque admiration of the protagonists of modern art: Duchamp, Dalí, Picasso. Furthermore, the artists express a recognition of the influence of modern art, but also a youthful, self-assured rebellion against the same. The criticism is thus directed at how these precursors were eventually compromised by the (commercial, official) art system.

[7] This anti-establishment stance led to two different approaches to display: One was based on self-sufficiency and was subcultural in the sense that it drew away from the established system to instead create its own. The other approach hijacked institutions to subvert them and provoked the media to expose double standards: If you want to *épater les bourgeois*,<sup>14</sup> you need to get their attention. Some artists sought to combine both approaches: "We performed at the documenta 8 in Kassel and three months later at the punk festival of the Bierfront in Aachen", stated Wolfgang Müller of Die Tödliche Doris, "to me that is in no way a contradiction".<sup>15</sup> Though it was not a contradiction to Müller, it was to some, resulting in a conflict in punk, which Frank Apunkt Schneider calls "art school vs. hard school".<sup>16</sup>

[8] Indeed, punk's very fabric often appears antagonistic. Punk was both dogged individualism and tight-knit community, lowlife-*Lumpenproletariat* attitude and art school-ironic posture, beer vomit, amphetamine rushes, and straight edge<sup>17</sup>. However, this complexity, which at times borders on self-contradiction, might be exactly why punk remains so intriguing. We should thus integrate dissonances into the analysis, not seek to defuse them. "I learnt all my politics and

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<sup>13</sup> Bazooka, quoted in: de Chasse, *Europunk*, 126.

<sup>14</sup> French for "shock the middle classes". The expression *Il faut épater le bourgeois* is attributed to Charles Baudelaire (see Elizabeth Knowles, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, Oxford 2006). It was used by the French Decadents in the second half of the nineteenth century and later in the 1960s student revolts as well as in punk. One recent example can be seen in the Italian hardcore punk band E.L.B. [Epater Le Bourgeois].

<sup>15</sup> Wolfgang Müller, transcript of an interview with Jacek Slaski, in an email to the author, October 10, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Frank Apunkt Schneider, *Als die Welt noch unterging: Von Punk zu NDW*, Mainz 2007, 180.

<sup>17</sup> The notion of living without any kind of alcohol, tobacco, or psychoactive drugs, sometimes also vegetarian or vegan. The expression was coined by the hardcore punk band Minor Threat in 1981.

understanding of the world through the history of art", the Sex Pistols' manager, Malcolm McLaren, stated in an interview with Jon Savage.<sup>18</sup> Not every punk street kid would agree. Nonetheless, art history and the ideas of the twentieth-century avant-gardes, especially Dada, Surrealism, and their neo-incarnations, reverberate in punk.

### "Dilettantes, rise up against art!"

[9] Punk's antagonistic strains also appear in the double theme of infantilism and dilettantism. There are different and sometimes antithetical versions of both notions in punk art: The conceptualizations of infantilism and dilettantism reveal expressions of both neo-romanticism and bleak realism, negation and creation, naïveté and cunningness. It is the synthesis of these disparate conceptualizations that best describes infantilism and dilettantism in punk art. One of the pivotal points is that both notions are connected to avant-garde art history and to youth rebellion alike. The anti-authoritarianism and deviance at the heart of the punk versions of both infantilism and dilettantism are thus conveyed in different spheres.

[10] Let us begin with dilettantism: The origin of the term is the Latin word *delectare*, meaning to delight in something.<sup>19</sup> In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, dilettantism was used in opposition to professionalism, that is, to describe both musicians and visual artists for whom their creation was not a means of subsistence, but pleasure (and who thus mostly belonged to the upper or middle classes). Later on, "dilettante" was generally used derogatorily, but decadent authors, such as Charles Baudelaire, and later the artistic reform movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century embraced the idea, linking it with enthusiasm, the processual, and a critical distance towards predefined objectives.

[11] In Surrealism and Dada, dilettantism merged into a far more radical attack on the "sacred" status of work, as Gavin Grindon argues: "Th[e] rupture with the idea of art was bound up with a rupture with the idea of *work*."<sup>20</sup> *Work* was thus set in opposition to *play*. The approach of play might be seen in the Surrealists' predilection for spontaneity, automatism, and supralogical word/image games. Johan Huizinga's seminal study *Homo Ludens* (1938) played a crucial role for the Surrealists, as well as for post-Surrealist groups such as the Situationist International and CoBrA.<sup>21</sup> In *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga counters the concept of *homo faber*, Latin for the working or building human, with *homo ludens*, the

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<sup>18</sup> Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming: The Sex Pistols and Punk Rock*, London 2005, 24.

<sup>19</sup> Harald Olbrich et al., eds., *Lexikon der Kunst*, 2nd revised edition, 7 vols., Leipzig 2004, vol. 2, 163.

<sup>20</sup> Gavin Grindon, "Surrealism, Dada, and the Refusal of Work: Autonomy, Activism, and Social Participation in the Radical Avant-Garde", in: *Oxford Art Journal* 34 (2011), no. 1, 79-96: 84; emphasis in original.

playing human, and presents the thesis that the greatest (cultural) achievements are reached through play.

[12] In Dada and Surrealism, the potential of play and the negation of work are furthermore linked with an oppositional stance towards both the commercial art system and the capitalistic political system. As Grindon notes: "The sovereignty of art, expressed in autonomy-as-a-value's ideal of free play, could be imagined as allied with attacks on other forms of sovereignty, such as that of capital or the state."<sup>22</sup> Dilettantism in this form thus potentially also entails a destabilizing political element. The message on the sign that hung over the entrance at the First International Dada Fair in Berlin in 1920 - "Dilettantes, rise up against art!" - was thus a slogan for independence, and its effect was not only aimed at the art world (fig. 2).



2 Opening of the First International Dada Fair in the book shop of Dr. Burchard in Berlin, July 1920, photograph. On the back wall hangs the sign "Dilettanten erhebt Euch gegen die Kunst!" (© BPK Bildagentur)

## Enfants Perdus, Enfants Terribles

[13] Like dilettantism, infantilism played a key role in the twentieth-century avant-gardes. The standard definition of infantilism is the "retention of childish physical, mental, or emotional qualities in adult life".<sup>23</sup> The term stems from Latin

<sup>21</sup> See Karen Kurczynski, *The Art and Politics of Asger Jorn: The Avant-Garde Won't Give Up*, Burlington VT 2014, and Libero Andreotti, "Architecture and Play", in: *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. Tom McDonough, Cambridge MA 2002, 213-240.

<sup>22</sup> Gavin Grindon, "Surrealism, Dada, and the Refusal of Work", 83. See also Matthew Gale, *Dada & Surrealism*, London 1997, and David Hopkins, *Dada and Surrealism*, Oxford 2004.

<sup>23</sup> "Infantilism", in: Merriam Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/infantilism> (accessed 11 December 2017).



*infantilis*, meaning childish, and was first introduced as a psychiatric diagnosis by Ernest-Charles Lasègue in 1864.<sup>24</sup> In the context of punk art, two theories on infantilism appear especially relevant: Sigmund Freud's theory of "psychosexual development" (1905) and Kazimierz Dąbrowski's "positive disintegration" (1967). In a few words, Freud's concept of sexual infantilism was determined by his description of five sexual stages in young childhood – the oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital stages – which, if suppressed, could result in a variety of mental disorders. Later in life, these childish, immoral desires manifest themselves in dreams. "Thus it becomes more certain that *the unconscious in our psychic life is the infantile*", Freud asserts.<sup>25</sup> The childish thus represents the candid, the egocentric, indeed the evil, that has not yet been tamed. Dąbrowski, by contrast, coined the expression "positive infantilism" or "positive immaturity", and found this quality in "highly gifted and creative individuals, especially artists", who, even as adults, maintain childish qualities of wonder, imagination, and sensitivity.<sup>26</sup>

[14] Freud's idea of the childish as unrepressed desire was seized upon in Surrealism and post-Surrealism. Salvador Dalí's painting *L'énigme du désir: Ma mère, ma mère, ma mère* (*The Enigma of Desire: My Mother, My Mother, My Mother*, 1929), for example, can be seen as an imagination of Freud's phallic stage of the male child's desire for his mother. At the same time, the Surrealists had an idealistic understanding of the integrity of a child's artistic expression, not unlike the one Dąbrowski would delineate some decades later, and artists such as Max Ernst, Yves Tanguy, and Joan Miró sought to reconnect with the vividness, magic, and imagination of their own infancy. There are direct personal and thematic ties leading from the Surrealists to the Letterist International, Situationist International, and further to the English SI splinter group King Mob and to the punk movement.<sup>27</sup> These connections become apparent in the way infantilism is conceptualized in punk. For example, the Situationists identified themselves as *enfants perdus*, or "lost children".<sup>28</sup> It is an old military term, which describes soldiers with a dangerous post or mission, and could just as well have

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<sup>24</sup> Christian Müller, ed., *Lexikon der Psychiatrie: Gesammelte Abhandlungen der gebräuchlichsten psychiatrischen Begriffe*, 2nd edition, Heidelberg 1986, 354-356.

<sup>25</sup> Sigmund Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, trans. G. Stanley Hall, New York 1920, 19; emphasis in original.

<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Mika, "Dabrowski's View on Authentic Mental Health", in: *Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration*, ed. Sal Mendaglio, Scottsdale AZ 2008, 139-153: 142.

<sup>27</sup> See Peter Wollen, "Bitter Victory: The Art and Politics of the Situationist International", in: *on the Passage of a few people through a rather brief moment in time: The Situationist International 1957-1972*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman, Cambridge MA 1989, 20-61, and David Wise, ed., *King Mob: A Critical Hidden History*, London 2014.

<sup>28</sup> "Enfants Perdus", in: Merriam Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/enfants%20perdus>, (accessed 11 December 2017).



been applied to punk. Guy Debord used it at the end of his film *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* from 1952, where the line "Nous vivons en enfants perdus nos aventures incomplètes" ("We live our incomplete adventures as lost children") is followed by twenty-four minutes of darkness.

[15] In Dada, infantilism was perceived either as opposition towards adulthood or escape from adulthood. The term "Dada" itself was a reference to the childish. In 1916, in his "Dada Fragments" diary, later published as *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* (trans. *Flight Out of Time*), Hugo Ball wrote:

*Childhood as a new world, and everything childlike and phantastic [sic], everything childlike and direct, everything childlike and symbolical in opposition to the sensibilities of the world of grown-ups. The child will be the accuser on Judgement Day, the Crucified One will judge, the Resurrected One will pardon.*<sup>29</sup>

Dada, Surrealism, and punk were reactions to world-gone-mad scenarios, each grounded in their different historical backgrounds. For the artists of all three movements, the aggressive, violent, and destructive language and imagery thus conveyed nothing other than an assessment of actual reality, and the child's true perception of that reality was seen as an ideal. The enfant terrible had reason to be so. "Dada proclaimed the return of the stuttered articulations of childhood as a defense mechanism in defiance of an idealistically holistic concept of art that glosses over reality", as Heinz Schütz points out – a vocation that he links to the punk movement in Germany in the early 1980s.<sup>30</sup> In both Dada and punk, infantilism was thus also directed against opportunistic and refined *art pour l'art*. The primitiveness of infancy was understood as cathartic.

### *L'école de l'art infantile*, or: "Infancy conforms to nobody"

[16] The first case study of infantilism and dilettantism in punk art is devoted to the black-and-white collage *L'école de l'art infantile*, which resulted from a collaboration between the artists group COUM Transmissions (often referred to simply as COUM) and Robin Klassnik (fig. 3). The two-page spread was printed in the first issue of the zine *VILE* in 1974. The collage shows photocopied clippings from advertisements featuring picture-perfect blond mothers and their babies next to photographs of male genitals, a baby with an open hole in its back, and crude misspelled statements put together using cut-out letters, such as "thEse ahh famUZ Peepholes SLUGS / FRee SUBscription".

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<sup>29</sup> Hugo Ball, "Dada Fragments 1916-1917", in: *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, ed. Robert Motherwell, 2nd edition, Cambridge MA 1981, 49-54: 52.

<sup>30</sup> Heinz Schütz: "Excess of Ruins, Cult of Catastrophe: Jencks, Einstürzende Neubauten and Punk and Tödliche Doris and", in: *Brilliant Dilletantes: Subculture in Germany in the 1980s*, ed. Leonhard Emmerling, Mathilde Weh, and Goethe Institut e.V., Ostfildern 2015, 130-141: 136.



3 COUM Transmissions and Robin Klassnik, *L'école de l'art infantile*, spread from: Anna Banana, ed., *Vile 1* (1974) [dated 1985], offset, 27.9 x 40.6 cm. The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York (courtesy Genesis BREYER P-ORRIDGE)

One picture shows four toddlers on their potty-chairs, with the caption "Photograph of the Artist's Studio". In the center of the collage is a repeated signature by one of the core members of COUM, Genesis P-Orridge, which was actually a rubber stamp, intended to negate the artist's signature in the sense of a sign which confirms value or originality, as P-Orridge explains. "It was also inspired by DIVINE who we read had a rubber stamp that said "YOURS SINCERELY DIVINE" that she would use when asked to autograph records and photos etc. Thee negation ov [sic] 'sincerely' was so twisted and brilliant."<sup>31</sup> Another image shows a baby with the cut-out letters "art" written on its dress, placed next to cut-outs of commercial templates and grown-up figures with empty faces. Towards the right bottom corner, where the artist's signature would traditionally be, there is a "no charge for above" notification with the address of the artists at Martello Street in London. The overall composition is irregular – with uneven spaces and rough edges, sometimes chopping off parts of images, such as the top of a head – and thus conveys the impression of an amateurish approach.

[17] In COUM's collage, infantilism is represented in two different ways: one negative and one positive. On the one hand, childishness is used to ridicule what P-Orridge calls "shamelessly self-promoting and success oriented" artists.<sup>32</sup> This disdain shows in the caricatured image of toddlers on the potty with the "Artist's Studio" caption: The image links the pride of the pooing infant – "look what I did, Mommy!" – to the posing of self-important artists, and thus in effect also compares art to excrement, though with less irony than, for example, Piero Manzoni in his 1961 work *Merda d'artista (Artist's Shit)*. As John Miller has noted

<sup>31</sup> Genesis BREYER P-ORRIDGE in an email to the author, 29 October 2018.

<sup>32</sup> Genesis P-Orridge, "To Be Ex-Dream: Photographic Sources of COUM Actions", in: *Painful But Fabulous: The Lives & Art of Genesis P-Orridge*, ed. Genesis P-Orridge, Brooklyn 2002, 154-159: 157.

in connection with Manzoni's *Shit*, one might also connect the art-as-excrement equation to "Karl Marx's declaration that under capitalism even the greatest artwork is worth only so many tons of manure".<sup>33</sup> The line-up of infants, who are being trained in social convention by learning to defecate at the same time, furthermore raises questions of obedience and restriction. In the equation of that image, the artists are thus disciplined to do as told by the (art) authorities. In P-Orridge's words, COUM engaged in the "raw celebration of the inexpert" rather than "careerism".<sup>34</sup> This stance is underscored through the "no charge for above" notification, a sideswipe at the commercial art system. The act of defecating, the weirdly out-of-context penis, and the deliberately abrasive spelling errors are all also used for their humor and shock value, thus highlighting the punkish-infantile aspects of the presentation. COUM seems to take great delight in their violation of decorum.

[18] On the other hand, COUM Transmissions perceive the infantile as an outsider position in a liberated sense: defiant, unfiltered, free. The image of the baby with the short assertion "art" might thus be read as an open symbol of the creative potential of children. An unrestrained inquisitiveness towards art as well as music remained an ideal for the group. After the artists transformed from an art to a music group in 1976, P-Orridge stated: "You should approach any instrument the way a child will."<sup>35</sup> In 1974, the same year the collage was made, the artists described their activities at an art festival in Rottweil, Germany, in a statement called *COUM Decoumposition: 'Schlimm'*: "In a way thee [sic] themes were, disturbance, thee [sic] similarities between mental stress and infancy. Infancy conforms to nobody said Emerson [Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1803-1882]."<sup>36</sup> The "decoumposition" in the title points to the themes of decay, rottenness, breakdown: all central topics in punk. The German word *schlimm* can be translated as bad, nasty, or wicked, and it is a term used to scold a child. Thus the title already entails both the iniquity of grown-up society and children's defiance against it. The Emerson line, "Infancy conforms to nobody", which the artists quote, further underscores this view of infantilism as an act of resistance. COUM seeks an approach that is in no way bound by normativity. This absolute lack of normativity is at the core of COUM's conceptualization of the infantile: it is the search for an unfiltered mindset.

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<sup>33</sup> John Miller: "Excremental Value: Piero Manzoni's 'Merda d'artista'", in: *Tate Etc.* 10 (summer 2007), <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/excremental-value> (accessed 17 December 2017).

<sup>34</sup> P-Orridge, "To Be Ex-Dream", 155-156.

<sup>35</sup> Simon Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984*, London 2005, 230.

<sup>36</sup> COUM Transmissions, *COUM Decoumposition: 'Schlimm'*, Rottweil 1974; MoMA Archives, New York City: MoMA Queens Artists' Books, file no. P1 A12g (no. 76 of edition of 500).

## Evil Impulses, Vile Attacks

[19] COUM Transmissions' collage can be seen to imply Sigmund Freud's theory of "psychosexual development" as described above – especially the image of defecating children, who would accordingly be in the so-called anal or anal-sadistic stage. In this stage, Freud saw sadism, aggression, and mastery in the child as connected to the progressing development of autonomy. He wrote that children's narcissistic focus on obtaining independence often makes them cruel. Freud thus explains later dreams of cruelty with this stage: "The evil impulses of the dream are merely infantilism."<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, the anal stage is characterized by the duality of giving and withholding, and in this context Freud interprets the child's excrement as a gift (to his or her parents) and sets up a comparison to money, that is feces = gift = money.<sup>38</sup> Freud also emphasizes the child's pride in having created something on his or her own. Put these descriptions all together – in the mid-1970s, Freud's theories were widely known – and the implication of COUM Transmissions' "Artist's Studio" caption becomes an even sharper criticism of the commerciality of art and the artist-gallerist relationship.

[20] *L'ecole de l'art infantile* furthermore targets the superficiality of advertisements in a double attack on what the artists saw as fake "ideal world" family values and the capitalistic exploitation of the same. This criticism is further emphasized in the choice of media: the collage per se transports a worldview that leaves room for fragmentation, disarray, and confusion. The glossy pretense of advertising's perfection is thus counteracted both through the chosen media and through the subject matter. COUM Transmissions point to abusive structures hidden behind traditional norms. The group exposes society's heteronormative imperative and mocks the gender stereotypes (e.g. the collage's triple repetition of mother-toddler images) conveyed through this imperative.<sup>39</sup>

[21] In its anti-authoritarian and countercultural proposition, the punk movement's view of society was linked with the aftereffects of the student revolts of 1968. Punk transported those views into mainstream youth culture, as Greil Marcus explains in relation to the Sex Pistols:

*[T]hey made it clear that their attack on the vacuity of pop was merely an instinctive means to a far more disturbing attack on sex, as the mystification behind love, on love, as the mystification behind the family, on the family, as the mystification behind the class system, on the class system, as the mystification behind capitalism, and finally on the very notion of progress – as the ultimate*

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<sup>37</sup> Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, 19.

<sup>38</sup> Sigmund Freud, "On Transformations of Instinct as Exemplified in Anal Erotism [1917]", quoted in: "Anal Stage", in: *A Dictionary of Psychology*, 4th edition, ed. Andrew M. Colman, Oxford 2015, 34.

<sup>39</sup> Indeed, this is one of the core issues of COUM Transmissions as well as their later reincarnation Throbbing Gristle. In 1993, by then Genesis BREYER P-ORRIDGE, went on to start the transformative "Pandrogeny Project" and now identifies as third gender.

*mystification behind post-industrial Western society itself. Veterans of spontaneous student revolts would have been familiar with such an expansion of vision – but the world of pop had never seen anything like it before.*<sup>40</sup>

[22] Marcus's description touches on a key factor of the mid- to late 1970s in the UK: hopelessness. While those "spontaneous student revolts" had dreamed of change, and had ultimately believed it to be possible, the punk movement's outlook was dark and dystopian, an attack on "the very notion of progress", as Marcus puts it. In 1976, the devaluation of the pound and the subsequent heavy budget cuts to public spending symbolically exposed the downfall of Britain. The economic crisis turned into a much broader crisis of confidence: "The decline was seen as having diverse symptoms – not just military and territorial but moral, cultural, spiritual and physical. The centuries-old British empire was dismantled in a couple of decades", Andy Beckett writes in his account of Britain in the 1970s, *When the Lights Went Out*.<sup>41</sup> As a consequence of this demise, and also as a backlash against the hippy revolution, neoconservatism was on the rise and was resulting in an increasingly oppressive political and cultural climate.

[23] Against this background, the impact of punk youth's dismissal of progress was even stronger. "If we think of Punk as an explosion [...] then the UK's economic recession during this period can be seen as the catalyst", Roger Sabin argues.<sup>42</sup> In 1977, COUM Transmissions' Peter Christopherson made a poster for the London punk fetish & fashion store BOY at 153 King's Road: It shows a battered and bleeding boy lying on the ground, with BOY written at the top and, at the bottom, in all caps and quotation marks, as though screamed out: "THE STRENGTH OF THE COUNTRY LIES IN ITS YOUTH!"<sup>43</sup> It is a nationalistic ("country") and potentially militaristic ("strength") message that points to a view of the youth as an instrument in a closed, traditionalist scheme. In Christopherson's poster, this quote is juxtaposed with the image of a hurting and destructive youth. The weakness of the country likewise lies in its youth, the image suggests. The violence implicit in the quote is thus turned around: society's immorality affects the youth.

[24] Around the same time, Christopherson also made a series of photos of "hopeless boys", among others the band members of the Sex Pistols, which are strongly reminiscent of Larry Clark's images of kids in *Tulsa* (1971): moving, hardcore, hurting, and very, very young (fig. 4). The violent boys' gangs in William S. Burroughs's *The Wild Boys: A Book of the Dead* (1971) and in Stanley

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<sup>40</sup> Greil Marcus, "Punk (1979)", n. p.

<sup>41</sup> Andy Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out: What Really Happened to Britain in the Seventies*, London 2009, 15.

<sup>42</sup> Roger Sabin, "Introduction", in: *Punk Rock: So What? The Cultural Legacy of Punk*, ed. Roger Sabin, London 1999, 3.

<sup>43</sup> See Peter Christopherson, *Photography*, Cugnaux 2016.

Kubrick's film version of *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), both set in dystopian societies, were similar points of reference. In the punk movement, however, youth was connotated both with ruthlessness and with tenderness, and – this is essential – those two traits were not necessarily understood as opposites.



4a Peter Christopherson, no title, 1975; republished in: Peter Christopherson, *Photography*, Cugnaux 2016 (courtesy Timeless Editions, timeless-shop.com)

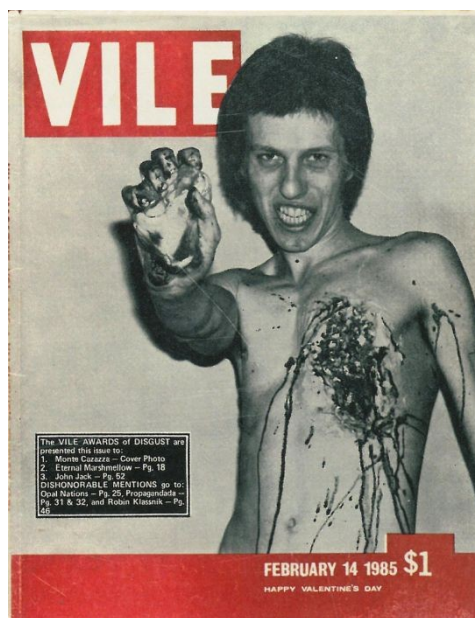


4b-c Peter Christopherson, no titles, 1975; republished in: Peter Christopherson, *Photography*, Cugnaux 2016 (courtesy Timeless Editions, timeless-shop.com)

[25] With their skeptical disposition, COUM Transmissions fit into *VILE*, which aimed "to reflect the negative, anti-social aspects of humanity", as the editor



Anna Banana stated.<sup>44</sup> The first issue, in which *L'ecole de l'art infantile* appeared, was deliberately misdated 14 February 1985 [actually January 1974], with the note "Happy Valentine's Day", and its cover featured a manipulated photo of performance artist and musician Monte Cazazza holding his own ripped-out heart towards the viewer (fig. 5).



5 Anna Banana and Bill Gaglione, cover of *VILE*, no. 1, January 1974 [dated 1985], offset with offset wrap cover, 27.9 x 21.6 cm. Image by Monte Cazazza. The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York (courtesy Anna Banana)

George Orwell's novel *1984* was often referenced in punk art, and Banana did so by placing *VILE* into a framework that was even *post* dystopia: "I linked it with Orwell and made it the year AFTER his famous tome."<sup>45</sup> The zine came out of "the blissed-out bohemia afoot in the Bay Area during the 1960s and early '70s", as Gretchen L. Wagner puts it, but soon became a crucial medium for the punk community: "The presence of the British art collective COUM Transmissions in the zine's pages offered one such bridge from the peacenik to the punk."<sup>46</sup> The small-circulation zine was done at Speedprint, an instant print shop in San Francisco, which made it evident to Banana "that anyone could be a publisher".<sup>47</sup> *VILE* thus

<sup>44</sup> Anna Banana, *About VILE: Mail Art, News and Photos from the Eternal Network*, Vancouver 1983, 1.

<sup>45</sup> Anna Banana, in an email to the author, 27 November 2017; emphasis in original.

<sup>46</sup> Gretchen L. Wagner, "Riot on the Page: Thirty Years of Zines by Women", in: *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*, ed. Cornelia Butler and Alexandra Schwartz, New York 2010, 444-461: 446.

<sup>47</sup> Banana, *About VILE*, 2.



reflected a nonprofessional DIY principle, with open submissions and cheap prices.

[26] The conviction of the advantages of nonprofessionalism was also conveyed in COUM's concept of a "school of infantile art". The group made several works that incorporated the *Ecole de l'art infantile* in one way or another, most in collaboration with Klassnik and the mail artist and surrealist publisher Opal L. Nations from Strange Faeces Press.<sup>48</sup> The use of French in the title might be read as an ironic allusion to art history and art schools, particularly the influential ones of the nineteenth century, such as the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. At the made-up *Ecole de l'art infantile*, "everyone was the director/principal and there were no students".<sup>49</sup> The exclusivity and hierarchy of the traditional academy are thus replaced by an egalitarian and autodidactic ideal. It is worth noting that this egalitarianism results not in everyone being a student, but in everyone being a director.

[27] COUM Transmissions also expressed this positive view on autodidacticism in their 1974 manifesto: "COUM enable all kinds of people to discover their abilities to express ideas through different media. COUM believe that you don't NEED special training to produce and/or enjoy worthwhile significant and unique works."<sup>50</sup> It was the dilettante's approach, but extended through the simultaneous overturning of professional status. COUM Transmissions sought to liberate artists working outside the system, while ridiculing those working within it. The historical connotation of dilettantism – pure delight in creating – was adjoined with the connotation of revolt.

[28] In the work of COUM Transmissions, both infantilism and dilettantism are thus means of attack. The artists attack conformism in all areas: art, education, family, society. Despite the apparent optimism in a statement like "COUM enable all kinds of people to discover their abilities", COUM Transmissions make it clear that the option of free creation would have to be a fight. "You don't NEED special training" alludes to: "Don't let nobody tell you that ...." In this context, childhood is perceived as a unique position of freedom: "Infancy conforms to nobody", and by extension infantilism (i.e. in this case the *intentional* retention of childish qualities in adult life) becomes an act of defiance.

### Caught on Super 8: Das Leben des Sid Vicious

[29] The second case study of the double theme of dilettantism and infantilism in punk art addresses the super 8 film *Das Leben des Sid Vicious* by the West Berlin artists group Die Tödliche Doris. The medium of super 8 was frequently used by Die Tödliche Doris, and it was a punk medium par excellence. "Super 8 became to

<sup>48</sup> Cosey Fanni Tutti, *Art Sex Music*, London 2017, 127.

<sup>49</sup> Genesis P-Orridge, quoted in: Wagner, *Riot on the Page*, 448.

<sup>50</sup> COUM Transmissions Manifesto 1974, quoted in: Simon Ford, *Wreckers of Civilisation: The Story of COUM Transmissions & Throbbing Gristle*, London 1999, 4.11.

film what the famous three chords were to music", Martin Schmitz remarks.<sup>51</sup> He is referring to the proverbial "three chords" of punk rock, the guitar chords A, E, and G, which appeared in the punk zine *Sideburns*, accompanied by a rough black marker drawing and the call: "This is a chord... this is another... this is a third. NOW FORM A BAND."<sup>52</sup> The super 8 format was introduced in 1965 by Kodak as a "home" medium. It became popular for use on family occasions, but also for alternative political cooperatives and underground filmmakers, including Derek Jarman, the punk/gay filmmaker icon, who used super 8 material for both *Sebastiane* (1976) and *Jubilee* (1978).<sup>53</sup> By the late 1970s and early 1980s, super 8 was already outdated, but still available everywhere. Nearly a fifth of all German households owned a super 8 setup, but it was becoming apparent that the near future belonged to VHS, which made super 8 very cheap. Cameras and film were bought at flea markets or simply picked up in parents' basements. Apart from their cheapness and availability, the super 8 cameras were also light, robust, and easy to operate, which likewise suited punk's DIY proposition. Even the ultra-short songs of punk fit with the super 8 cameras; the 8mm cassettes were only three minutes long anyway.

[30] The technical limitations of super 8 resulted in a distinct aesthetic: the images appear discolored, shaky, and grainy, with visible scratches and quick editing cuts mostly done ad hoc directly in the camera. Furthermore, as Dirk Schaefer has observed, super 8 "is an incomparably direct, even corporal medium of unusual vulnerability. Every screening can be the last: indeed, every screen is the last in a certain sense, because a little bit is eroded from the original every time. We see and hear the film disintegrating."<sup>54</sup> This unique material quality was often reinforced by the artists, who urinated on the film strips or scratched or sewed into them. Decay and destruction were thus both themes integrated into super 8.

[31] In Die Tödliche Doris's *Das Leben des Sid Vicious*, which premiered in the alternative cinema Arsenal in West Berlin in 1981, the bass player of the Sex Pistols is embodied by a 2-year-old boy (fig. 6).<sup>55</sup> The film reenacts some of the key stages of Vicious's life; his performance in Julien Temple's mockumentary

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<sup>51</sup> Martin Schmitz, "The Medium Was the Message", in: *Berlin Super 80*, booklet accompanying the DVD *Berlin Super 80: Music & Film Underground West Berlin 1978-1984* (Monitorpop Entertainment, 2005), 7.

<sup>52</sup> *Sideburns* no. 1 (January 1977), London, n. p.

<sup>53</sup> Daniel Kulle, "Alle Macht der Super-8: Die West-Berliner Super-8-Film-Bewegung und das Erbe des Punks", in: *Punk in Deutschland: Sozial- und Kulturwissenschaftliche Perspektiven*, ed. Philipp Meinert and Martin Seeliger, Bielefeld 2013, 261-281: 262.

<sup>54</sup> Dirk Schaefer, "City of Projections: The West Berlin Super-8 Movement between Punk and Art School", in: *Wer sagt denn, dass Beton nicht brennt, hast Du's probiert? Film im West-Berlin der 80er Jahre/ Who says concrete doesn't burn, have you tried? West Berlin Film in the '80s*, eds. Stefanie Schulte Strathaus and Florian Wüst, Berlin 2008, 26-35: 29.

about the Sex Pistols, *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* (1980), his self-destructive love-hate relationship with Nancy Spungen, Vicious allegedly stabbing Spungen to death at the Chelsea Hotel in New York in October 1978, and his death not long afterwards from a heroin overdose.<sup>56</sup>



6 Die Tödliche Doris, *Das Leben des Sid Vicious*, 1981, super 8 film still. Die Tödliche Doris Archiv, Berlin (courtesy Wolfgang Müller)

[32] Die Tödliche Doris begin the film with the weirdly conventional biographical title *The Life of ...*. The title is assembled out of cut-out letters, recalling the seminal album cover designed by Jamie Reid for *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols*. The dryness of the title is soon counteracted when the surrealistic image of a toddler wearing a swastika T-shirt, chains, studded-leather bracelet, and black spiked hair appears. In the background, the French version of "Anarchy in the UK" plays in a slightly distorted version. However, instead of the streets of Paris (as in Temple's movie), it is recognizably the streets of West Berlin. The child crawls, stumbles, finds some loose paving stones, throws them about. He is filmed from above, from the position of an adult. In the next scene, "Sid" is with "Nancy" (played by a 7-year-old girl) in a dark and chaotic room, filled with cigarette butts and empty liquor bottles. The two get into a pillow fight, play with a knife, and "Sid" stabs the girl to death in a whirl of ketchup (or blood) (fig. 7). In the last sequences, the camera shows a syringe, then the child appears to give himself a fix. He looks about, disoriented, cries, then falls asleep (or dies). "L'anarchie pour le U.K." sets in again.

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<sup>55</sup> Oskar, the son of Die Tödliche Doris' member Dagmar Dimitroff. See Wolfgang Müller, "Das Leben des Sid Vicious", in: *Die Tödliche Doris, Kino/ Cinema*, eds. Wolfgang Müller and Martin Schmitz, Berlin 2004, 29-33: 29.

<sup>56</sup> See Savage, *England's Dreaming*, 502-530.



7 Die Tödliche Doris, *Das Leben des Sid Vicious*, 1981, super 8 film still. Die Tödliche Doris Archiv, Berlin (courtesy Wolfgang Müller)

### The Good, the Sad, and the Ugly Truth

[33] Perhaps the most forceful effect of the film is the way it circumvents our expected perceptions. The violence emerges as banal, the perpetrator as innocent, the surreal as the real. The sense of "childhood" is reinforced by the use of super 8, an effect that would have been even stronger in the early 1980s, when the medium was associated with family recordings. At the same time, the specific super 8 aesthetic imbues the scenes with a paradoxical sense of trashiness, truth, and trauma. The actions and people on the screen appear both real and unreal, also because the child looks directly into the camera, and thus breaks any filmic illusion. All crying and screams, both "Sid's" and "Nancy's", were done by Wolfgang Müller. In super 8 films, sound and image were recorded separately, which resulted in a certain alienation effect (not unlike the one in Rainer Werner Fassbinder's films). But even with the distance of an alienation effect, *Das Leben des Sid Vicious* is nonetheless extremely difficult to watch. The innocence of the child playing, crying, is at times heartbreaking. As a viewer, one looks at the child, that is "Sid", from above, one understands the context better than he does, one assumes he is being told what to do. The viewer is thus made into an accomplice.

[34] The naïveté of Sid Vicious is often described by his contemporaries. "We'd go to the shop and Vivienne [Westwood] would just put a pair of trousers on him. He was like a toy almost [...] he was [...] so idealistic and so clever", Viv Albertine told Jon Savage. "He could be a pain in the arse, but he was the type of person, like a lot of junkies, who are so idealistic that they can't handle life as it is."<sup>57</sup> Vicious's role in the media, especially in the English tabloids, was the opposite. After Nancy Spungen's death, "Sid had finally turned into a fully-blown scapegoat: a media monster from the id", Jon Savage notes.<sup>58</sup> With a single move, Die

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<sup>57</sup> Viv Albertine, quoted in: Savage, *England's Dreaming*, 194-195.

Tödliche Doris turns that image around: Vicious becomes an abandoned child (fig. 8).



8 Die Tödliche Doris, *Das Leben des Sid Vicious*, 1981, super 8 film still. Die Tödliche Doris Archiv, Berlin (courtesy Wolfgang Müller)

Sid Vicious became a strong figure of identification for such perceptions: "Sid ist unschuldig (ich auch)!" ("Sid is innocent [so am I]!") read one graffiti of the punk scene.<sup>59</sup> *Das Leben des Sid Vicious* thus displays punk's sentimental ideal of the sad, good, true child, who is ruined by the corrupted society of grown-ups, and who ultimately is faced with either adaptation or escape (into death). The ugly truth to counter this romanticism, however, is the actual violence that took place at the Chelsea Hotel, and which is also present in the storyboard of Die Tödliche Doris' film. That little boy kills that little girl.

[35] The sweetness of both children – we are looking at a "Sid" as vivid as Caravaggio's *Victorious Cupid (Amor Vincit Omnia, 1601-1602)* and a Lolita-like "Nancy" – complicates matters. There are sentiments not only of innocence here, but also of sex. In punk, sex was (again) a conflicted topic: There are notions both of anti-sex and ultra-sex. Either way, normativity was rejected. Punk's androgynous style was linked both with the movement's sense of performativity and its deep intertwinement with queer communities. Within the frame of the topic of infantilism, however, androgyny could also be understood as a refusal to grow up.

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<sup>58</sup> Savage, *England's Dreaming*, 509.

<sup>59</sup> *Zurück zum Beton: Die Anfänge von Punk und New Wave in Deutschland 1977-'82*, exh. cat. Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, eds. Ulrike Groos, Peter Gorschlüter and Jürgen Teipel, Cologne 2002, 80.

## Broken Heroes, Failed Revolutionaries

[36] The reactions to the film were mixed. Its method and moral were questioned, but in the punk rock press, one assertion often resurfaced: It was shocking and (thus) true to its subject. "The *Life of Sid Vicious* short portrays the punk idiom better than the thousands of disposable artefacts that have appeared since its beginning", wrote *SOUNDS* magazine. In New York, the *East Village Eye* found: "The pure shock value of Die Tödliche Doris' *The Life of Sid Vicious* would make Malcolm McLaren turn green." *The New Musical Express* wrote: "Once the shock wears off, one is left with the devastatingly simple metaphor for a childmind playing with things beyond his control."<sup>60</sup>

[37] Die Tödliche Doris cited The Stranglers' song "No More Heroes" in their artists' statement, noting how Sid Vicious eventually turned out to be the very last hero.<sup>61</sup> The Stranglers' song has often been interpreted as a rejection of late-hippy self-satisfied music heroes (the "rock gods": the Beatles, the Stones, Pink Floyd), and consequently *no heroes!* is often connected with punk's battle cry for equality in music as well as art. However, the text simply goes "Whatever happened to the heroes? No more heroes any more."<sup>62</sup> That can also be understood as an expression of regret, rather than a claim. The notion of failure-as-heroism characterizes punk. Perhaps punk still wanted heroes, but different ones, broken ones. A good argument can be made for this interpretation, firstly because of the (anti)heroes mentioned in the song – Leon Trotsky, Lenny Bruce, and Sancho Panza – and secondly because Hugh Cornwell has indicated this reading in interviews with Diedrich Diedrichsen.<sup>63</sup>

[38] There is a longing for failure in punk as well as a strong element of self-skepticism. "The idea was to work, not with power, but weakness and introversion," Savage writes about Subway Sect.<sup>64</sup> Often, punks did not present themselves as strong and confident, but as outsiders and losers. Within music as well as art, failure was a consciously applied concept, and was regarded as far more interesting than success. In interviews, Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren emphasized failed rebellions as their inspiration and aspiration: the

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<sup>60</sup> Dave Henderson, in: *SOUNDS*, London, July 1983, the *New Musical Express*, London, October 1983, *East Village Eye*, New York, 1984, all cited from: *Die Tödliche Doris*, *Kino/Cinema*, 32.

<sup>61</sup> Müller, *Das Leben des Sid Vicious*, 29.

<sup>62</sup> The Stranglers, *No More Heroes* (United Artists, 1977).

<sup>63</sup> Diedrich Diedrichsen, "Intensität – Negation – Klartext: Simultanes und Inkommensurables zwischen Theorie, Bildender Kunst und Musik im deutschen Punk", in: *Zurück zum Beton: Die Anfänge von Punk und New Wave in Deutschland 1977-'82*, exh. cat. Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, eds. Ulrike Groos, Peter Gorschlüter and Jürgen Teipel, Cologne 2002, 137-146: 141.

<sup>64</sup> Savage, *England's Dreaming*, 419.

Gordon Riots of the 1780s and the machine-wrecking Luddites, fighting the inevitable.<sup>65</sup> "Guess my race is run", The Clash sang, "I fought the law and the law won."<sup>66</sup>

[39] Whereas such an interpretation – Vicious as broken, tragic, sincere hero – corresponds with the romantic side of punk, the film by Die Tödliche Doris also entails an element of punk's other side: the cynical reflection of pop media phenomena. *Das Leben des Sid Vicious* is a swindle version of swindles: The reenacted scenes are mainly taken from Julian Temple, the title screen copies Jamie Reid, and the camera following "Sid" in the street could refer to paparazzi. "I got you in my camera / I got you in my camera / a second of your life / ruined for life," as Johnny Rotten sang in 1977.<sup>67</sup> Die Tödliche Doris' *Das Leben des Sid Vicious* thus ambiguously implements both punk's romantic and its cynical sentiment. The short film joins punk's tragic child-hero with the multiplied and mediated mass-phenomenon, and does so in a setting that, at the same time, is pure swindle and displays an odd kind of social realism. The feeling in the *Das Leben des Sid Vicious* film, however, remains raw; the immediacy of the child bleeds into the sensation of the film as a whole.

### The Lost Boys of Punk

[40] Abandoned children were a leitmotif in punk, and punks themselves were often very young. The punk community saw itself as a safe haven for children who lashed out, because they alone could see the greed and hollowness of adult society. In 1980, John Lydon (formerly with the Sex Pistols, then with Public Image Ltd) sang: "Can't go on, drag along / can't go wrong, sing along / Pied Piper will lead you to the water."<sup>68</sup> In the fable, the people of Hamelin hire the Pied Piper to get rid of the rats and he does so by using his pipe to lead them to the water to drown. When the people of Hamelin refuse to pay him as agreed, the Pied Piper returns in disguise, and this time he plays a tune that makes all the children follow him. They are never seen again. The naive children thus pay the price for the wrongs of the adults. The infantile sentiment of isolation is also a recurring topic. The lyrics "Now I wanna be a good boy / I don't wanna be bad / Now I wanna run away from home / Now I wanna be on my own / Now I wanna be sad alone," from the Ramones' album *Leave Home* might be seen in this context.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> "Malcolm McLaren im Gespräch mit Gerald Matt", in: *Punk: No One Is Innocent. Kunst - Stil - Revolte*, exh. cat. Kunsthalle Wien, eds. Gerald Matt and Thomas Mießgang, Nuremberg 2008, 196-201: 200.

<sup>66</sup> The Clash, *I Fought the Law* (CBS, 1979). Original by Sonny Curtis, 1958.

<sup>67</sup> Sex Pistols, *I Wanna Be Me* (Virgin Records, 1977).

<sup>68</sup> Public Image Ltd, *Pied Piper* (Virgin Records, 1980).

<sup>69</sup> Ramones, *Now I Wanna Be a Good Boy* (Sire Records, 1977).



Youth thus represents both innocence and sadness, whereas malevolence is caused by a reaction to neglect and injustice.

[41] The figure onto whom these fantasies of arrested development as an escape from the perils of grown-up society were projected most prominently was Sid Vicious. Ironically, heroin actually does "embalm the user's body and emotions. Sid and Nancy were locked into permanent adolescence", as Savage points out.<sup>70</sup> Permanent adolescence is evidently also the theme of J. M. Barrie's novel *Peter Pan, or: The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up* (1911), another object of punk allusion, another *no future*. The Lost Boys, for example, a Swansea-based punk band formed in early 1980, named themselves after Peter Pan and his band of outcast, forever childish boys, all mischievous, yet pure at heart.<sup>71</sup> They are the boys "who fall out of their prams when the nurse is looking the other way and if they are not claimed in seven days, they are sent far away to the Neverland. I'm Captain",<sup>72</sup> as Peter Pan explains in Barrie's play. They are the forgotten children, who flee the real world to be together in an alternative one. The background of this negative point of view was a society that was perceived to be in decline. Punk reacted with a double strategy. One aspect was the reassessment of reality: "Face the coldness surrounding you!", Diedrich Diedrichsen summoned the call.<sup>73</sup> The other aspect was a dark, sometimes amoral, but poetic escapism. This ambiguity is crystallized in punk's conceptualization of infantilism: Because the assessment of the state of society is so extremely negative, the urgent escape into the child-like emerges as a fierce accusation.

[42] Infantilism in punk is also linked with truth-telling. The child is depicted as the only one who is honest enough to tell it like it is, a notion which echoes the concept of the childish in Dada. One story which resurfaces in punk is the fairy tale *The Emperor's New Clothes*. Here, the child is the only one who goes against vanity, authority, and greed. At the end of the story, Hans Christian Andersen writes: "The Emperor shivered, for he suspected they were right. But he thought, 'This procession has got to go on.' So he walked more proudly than ever, as his noblemen held high the train that wasn't there at all."<sup>74</sup> There is a subversive undertone here; those in power never change. In 1979, the Manchester-based minimalist/punk group Gerry & The Holograms released *The Emperor's New Music* on Absurd Records, but the vinyl record was glued to the inside of the

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<sup>70</sup> Savage, *England's Dreaming*, 502.

<sup>71</sup> See the entry on "The Lost Boys" on the Punkhouse Record Shop website, <http://punkhouserecordshop.com/the-lost-boys-history> (accessed 18 December 2017).

<sup>72</sup> When Wendy asks why there are no girls, Peter tells her, they are much too clever to fall out of their prams. See J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*, London 1928, act I, scene 1.

<sup>73</sup> Diedrich Diedrichsen, quoted in: Peter Glaser, "Geschichte wird gemacht: Über Punk und Sprache", in: *Zurück zum Beton: Die Anfänge von Punk und New Wave in Deutschland 1977-'82*, exh. cat. Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, eds. Ulrike Groos, Peter Gorschlüter and Jürgen Teipel, Cologne 2002, 121-128: 122.

picture sleeve. It was thus impossible to take the record out without ruining it: a critical comment on pretense in the music business.

[43] As recently as 2017, the performance group Pussy Riot wrote in their *Punk Manifesto*: "When you say that the emperor is naked, you may end up being punched in the face by the emperor's bodyguards."<sup>75</sup> In that comparison, Russian president Vladimir Putin would be the emperor. Another example might be seen in the Sex Pistols' single *God Save the Queen*, which was released in 1977, thus concurring with the celebration of the Queen's Silver Jubilee, with Johnny Rotten screaming about the "mad parade" and the "fascist regime".<sup>76</sup> One reason the song was so successful, despite being banned by BBC Radio, was the feeling, especially among young people, that no one else was saying the obvious: The Jubilee was "a state-reinforced lie: an attempt to pretend nothing was wrong in Rotten Britain", as Savage writes.<sup>77</sup> In punk, of course, the exposure of the charade was linked to hate and aggression in a way it is not in the fairy tale.

[44] All three analogies, the Pied Piper, Peter Pan, and the Emperor, produce two shared effects: First, the unexpected juxtaposition of old-fashioned imagery and punk's contemporaneous situation makes a metaphor out of the situations and events of the 1970s reality. Second, the fables evoke the memory of our own sentiments and thoughts about these stories as a child, and thus also emotionalize us. The metaphorical and emotional charging of events projects a further-reaching social critique, which at times alludes to a fundamentally negative view on human nature.

## Sentimental Youth

[45] Punk's negative view on human nature was also transported in the movement's youthful longing for death and destruction. Die Tödliche Doris, for example, helped arrange the *Festival Genialer Dilletanten* (Festival of Ingenious Dilletantes [sic]) in West Berlin in 1981. The subtitle of the festival was *Die Große Untergangsshow* (The Great Downfall Show). The event took place in the Tempodrom, a big building that resembles a circus tent and is located near Potsdamer Platz. In 1981, it was very close both to the Berlin Wall and the bombed-out former headquarters of the SS (where the Topography of Terror

<sup>74</sup> Hans Christian Andersen, "The Emperor's New Clothes" [1837], transl. Jean Hersholt, on the website of The Hans Christian Andersen Centre, University of Southern Denmark SDU, [http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheEmperorsNewClothes\\_e.html](http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheEmperorsNewClothes_e.html) (accessed 18 December 2017).

<sup>75</sup> Nadya Tolokonnikova/ Pussy Riot, *Punk Manifesto*, July 2017, i-D VICE, [https://i-d.vice.com/en\\_uk/article/59g54q/nadya-from-pussy-riot-is-rewriting-what-it-means-to-be-punk](https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/59g54q/nadya-from-pussy-riot-is-rewriting-what-it-means-to-be-punk) (accessed 18 December 2017).

<sup>76</sup> Sex Pistols, *God Save the Queen* (Virgin Records, 1977).

<sup>77</sup> Jon Savage, "London Subversive", in: *Goodbye to London: Radical Art and Politics in the Seventies*, ed. Astrid Proll, Cologne 2010, 12-31: 29.

Documentation Center is today). With the Wall as a symbol of the potential for World War III, and the remnants of the Nazi regime as a symbol of the horrors of history, the evil of human nature thus seemed to be immediately evident.

[46] West Berlin was in a unique situation at the time, it was the over-subsidized Western frontier, a small island lying isolated in the middle of the German Democratic Republic. In the words of David Bowie (who lived together with Iggy Pop in West Berlin from 1976 to 1978), it was "the heroin capital of Europe",<sup>78</sup> a reputation only enforced by *Christiane F. – Wir Kinder vom Bahnhof Zoo* (*Zoo Station: The Story of Christiane F.*; book 1978/ film 1981). Living in Berlin signified living on the edge, and the half-city became a myth in punk, a symbol of decadence and brokenness. Berlin stood for the interwar avant-garde; it stood for Dada, Cabaret, Mack the Knife, and the demise-to-come. In the *Einstürzende Neubauten* (the band's name means "collapsing new buildings") song called *Ich stehe auf Berlin* (I am into Berlin), Blixa Bargeld cries: "I am into fire / I am into smoke / I am into noise / I am into decay / I am into sickness / I am into ruin / I am into the end."<sup>79</sup>

[47] The acts at the *Untergangsshow* included the duo *Sentimentale Jugend* (that is, "sentimental youth"). The name itself was a sarcastic statement. One half of the duo was 16-year-old Alexander Hacke, who performed under the pseudonym Alexander von Borsig, an ironic mix of the aristocratic "von" and "Borsig," from the Borsig machine factory in Berlin-Tegel where his father worked. The other half was the then 19-year-old Christiane X., better known as the child heroin addict Christiane F. At the *Untergangsshow*, one half of this "sentimental youth", aka von Borsig, sang in German: "Hiroshima, how beautiful it was, back then the lightning STROKE", then widened his eyes and laughed.<sup>80</sup> One might recall the Sex Pistols' song "Belsen Was a Gas", which begins as a horribly misconceived joke about the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen, then ends with the lines: "Be a man, kill someone, kill yourself."<sup>81</sup> Both songs take on the most extreme shock topic to be found with a youthful ruthlessness and an inclination for both destruction and self-destruction.

[48] Violence and destruction were an immediate way of communicating urgency, transcending any elaborate explanation. Behind the insensitivity, however, the theatrical hurtfulness was a way of pointing out absurdness, even madness. The songs by the Sex Pistols and *Sentimentale Jugend* thus both share a sense of destructive delirium. Referring back to COUM's statement in *COUM*

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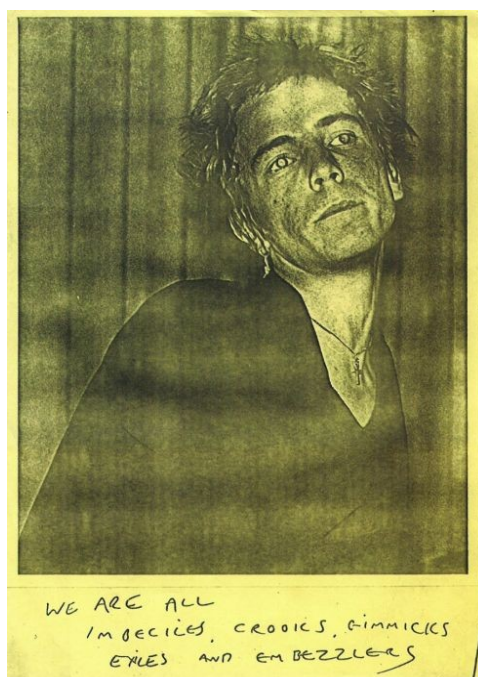
<sup>78</sup> David Buckley, *Strange Fascination: David Bowie. The Definitive Story*, London 2005, 269.

<sup>79</sup> *Einstürzende Neubauten, Ich Steh Auf Berlin* (ZickZack, 1983).

<sup>80</sup> See Käthe Kruse, *Lob des Imperfekts: Kunst, Musik und Wohnen im West-Berlin der 1980er Jahre*, Berlin 2017, Kindle 233-40.

<sup>81</sup> Sex Pistols, *Belsen Was a Gas* (Virgin Records, 1979).

*Decomposition: "Schlimm"*, the association of "infancy" and "mental stress" is telling. In punk, one might find a strong identification with any alienated group of individuals. This is the frame of reference in punk band names such as The Epileptics, The Idiots, The Insane, The Mentally Ill, or The Newtown Neurotics. There is a sympathy for the outsider, who is perceived as the truthful one, or the mentally ill, who are perceived as the actually sane in an insane world (fig. 9). Fragility meant sensitivity, brokenness meant honesty.



9 Jon Savage, photocopy on yellow paper of a photograph of Johnny Rotten by Joseph Stevens juxtaposed with writing by Jamie Reid, 1979 (courtesy Jamie Reid, Jon Savage)

[49] This is echoed in punk's fantasies of running amok. The underlying argument of Johnny Rotten's "I wanna destroy the passerby"<sup>82</sup> was thus akin to André Breton's in the *Surrealist Manifesto*:

*The simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd. Anyone who, at least once in his life, has not dreamed of thus putting an end to the petty system of debasement and cretinization in effect has a well-defined place in that crowd with his belly at barrel-level.*<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Sex Pistols, *Anarchy in the UK* (EMI, 1976).

<sup>83</sup> André Breton, "Second Manifesto of Surrealism" [1929], in: *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen Lane, Ann Arbor 1969, 125.

## Not Able and Not Willing

[50] The above-mentioned *Festival Genialer Dilletanten* played a crucial role for the conceptualization of dilettantism in German punk, and the festival united two different versions of dilettantism. Essentially, dilettantism in punk art had two opposing connotations: One was making powerful art *despite* a lack of refined skills, and the other was making powerful art *because* of the lack of the same. Regardless of this fundamental difference, the de facto implications, such as nonconformism and anti-authoritarianism, were nonetheless analogous. Both versions of dilettantism thus existed side by side in punk art.

[51] The first version (art *despite*) was bound up with punk's democratization of art as well as music. In the mid-1970s, galleries and music companies alike were sustaining a style that punks criticized as elitist, distant, and over-produced. Writing in his journal in 1976, COUM Transmissions' Genesis P-Orridge dismissed most contemporary art as "irrelevant in its lofty pretensions, requiring almost a degree in semantics".<sup>84</sup> As noted above, the sentiment is also represented in COUM Transmissions' manifesto, "COUM believe that you don't NEED special training ...".<sup>85</sup> This line of argumentation tied in with punk's overall DIY ethos, as applied to all aspects of art and life. Käthe Kruse of Die Tödliche Doris describes moving into a squatted house in West Berlin:

*Did I know how to glaze a window or install a toilet bowl? Did I know how to make music or how to make art? No. I really did not know how to do anything, as my dad had told me often enough: You are nothing, you know nothing, and nothing will become of you. But when you enter into something, then you do know after all.*<sup>86</sup>

[52] Art *despite* is thus first and foremost a defiance of the old system. The DIY impetus signifies a distinctive way of doing things, autonomously of the big record companies, expensive galleries, and conservative academies and conservatories. Ultimately, however, this understanding strives to demonstrate that the new, independent structures – in art, music, design – will be able to compete with and even overthrow the old ones. The proof of the quality of the artistic work then becomes all the more indispensable.

[53] The second connotation (art *because*) was linked to the notion that the most interesting and worthwhile art would emerge without the restraint of skill or sophistication. In the book on the Geniale Dilletanten edited by Wolfgang Müller of Die Tödliche Doris, the focus is on this version of dilettantism. The spelling mistake with a double "l" and single "t" was found on a flyer for the *Festival Genialer Dilletanten*, and the members of Die Tödliche Doris, together with the publishing house Merve, decided to keep it. Error fit the artistic concept. As

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<sup>84</sup> Genesis P-Orridge, quoted in: Ford, *Wreckers of Civilisation*, 5.17.

<sup>85</sup> COUM Transmissions Manifesto 1974, quoted in: Ford, *Wreckers of Civilisation*, 4.11.

<sup>86</sup> Käthe Kruse, interview with the author, Berlin, 23 October 2017.

inspiration for integrating the mistake, Müller refers to two Dada sources: Marcel Duchamp's magazine *RONGWRONG*, and the poem *fmsbwtzäu* which Raoul Hausmann took from a misprint on a Czech poster.<sup>87</sup>

[54] The "ingenious" before the "dilletantes" was a way of ridiculing the pseudo-mystical talent of the (white, male) artist-genius. "The serious musician or artist is a victim of his own inbreeding", Müller wrote, and further: "Where actual emptiness is visible, dillettantism can evoke a provocative shock by attacking this 'progress', which is most antiquated, with noise and racket."<sup>88</sup> The line of reasoning was that the process of refinement, whether in art or music, only covers up emptiness. Instead, "mistakes" are understood as chances: stuttering, forgetting, mispronouncing, wasting, losing.<sup>89</sup> The concept thus combined childish curiosity, play, and the rule of chance.

[55] This de-skilled version of punk art might also be seen in an (art) historical context in which the use of errors and coincidences were key elements, from Marcel Duchamp's *Erratum Musical*<sup>90</sup> to William Burroughs' and Brion Gysin's cut-up experiments<sup>91</sup> to Dieter Roth's "shitty poems" and disintegrating art.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, dilettantism is then also connected to a view of art as a process instead of a finished object, a criticism of originality as an absolute term, and a skeptical attitude towards any moralistic declarations in art.

[56] Punk was thus engaged in a double rupture: "It was not only about not being able to do something, but not being willing", said Thomas Meinecke, the singer and guitarist of F.S.K., in an interview in connection with the *Geniale Dilletanten* exhibition at the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden.<sup>93</sup> He is playing on a conservative bon mot in Germany - "Kunst kommt vom Können, nicht vom

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<sup>87</sup> Wolfgang Müller, interview with the author, Berlin, 25 October 2017.

<sup>88</sup> Wolfgang Müller, "Die wahren Dilletanten", in: *Geniale Dilletanten*, ed. Wolfgang Müller, Berlin 1982, 12.

<sup>89</sup> See *Die Tödliche Doris, Kunst - The Deadly Doris Art*, Berlin 1999, 52.

<sup>90</sup> English: "musical mistake". Marcel Duchamp, *Erratum Musical* [1913], a sort of ready-made libretto with completely random notes pulled from a hat, first performed at the *Manifestation of Dada*, 1920. See *A House Full of Music: Strategien in Musik und Kunst*, exh. cat. Institut Mathildenhöhe Darmstadt, ed. Ralf Beil, Ostfildern 2012, 27.

<sup>91</sup> See *Cut-Ups, Cut-Ins, Cut-Outs: The Art of William S. Burroughs*, exh. cat. Kunsthalle Wien, eds. Colin Fallows and Synne Genzmer, Nuremberg 2012.

<sup>92</sup> See *Und weg mit den Minuten. Dieter Roth und die Musik*, exh. cat. Kunsthaus Zug and Nationalgalerie im Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, ed. Matthias Haldemann, Lucerne 2014.

<sup>93</sup> Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, "Geniale Dilletanten: Subkultur der 1980er Jahre in Deutschland", youtube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-MSN2P5VIs4> (accessed 18 December 2017).

Wollen, sonst hieße es Wunst" (art comes from *ability*, not *intention*, otherwise it would be called *irt*) – that had been in use since the nineteenth century, was popular with the Nazis,<sup>94</sup> and was restated every so often as a critique of modern art. It has been countered with other versions over the years. With a certain degree of pathos, Arnold Schönberg stated "Kunst kommt vom Müssen", that is, art comes from necessity.<sup>95</sup> The version "Kunst kommt vom Künden", that is, art comes from announcing, is attributed to Joseph Beuys.<sup>96</sup> What is distinctive in Meinecke's assertion though, is that he refuses to engage in any sort of justification; he is negating the system as such. These artists and musicians did not want to belong, they did not want to gratify any conformist expectations. The criteria thus shifted: no "careerism",<sup>97</sup> as P-Orridge had called it, but also no clarification, no edifying mission.

### In Conclusion: "Be Childish."

[57] The double theme of infantilism and dilettantism in punk art points to a field of partly intersecting, partly ambiguous meanings. Nonconformism, anti-authoritarianism, and – at the core – liberty are all transported through both concepts. Both infantilism and dilettantism are thus used to evade conventional power structures. Furthermore, both are used to invert expectations and deconstruct otherwise static understandings: In punk, success might be failure, will might be chance, the surreal might be real, and the guilty might be the innocent. These circumventions are tied to a rejection of the status quo, which carries both escapist and social realist traits, and which again is expressed both through dilettantism and infantilism. In both cases, the associated adjectives – "infantile" and "dilettantish" – can be used as insults, but in punk, such negative associations were turned into a strength. Indeed, the word "punk" is a similar circumvolution of connotations of weakness, youth, and misconduct. The recurring theme is thus one of defiance.

[58] The two case studies presented in this article both exemplify how infantilism and dilettantism are at the core of punk art, in form as well as content. In both artworks, the childish is interpreted as honest, free, and real. These infantile qualities, however, also cause unfiltered pain and unfiltered physicality, leading

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<sup>94</sup> Katrin Engelhardt, "Die Ausstellung 'Entartete Kunst' in Berlin 1938: Rekonstruktion und Analyse", in: *Angriff auf die Avantgarde: Kunst und Kunstpolitik im Nationalsozialismus*, ed. Uwe Fleckner, Berlin 2007, 98-197: 104.

<sup>95</sup> Arnold Schönberg, "Probleme des Kunstunterrichts" [1911], quoted from: Text archive of the Arnold Schönberg Center in Vienna, <https://schoenberg.at/index.php/de/archiv/texte> (number T14.07; accessed 12 November 2018).

<sup>96</sup> Günther Uecker, "Die Kunst des Kündens. Zum Tod von Joseph Beuys", in: *Die Zeit*, no. 6, 31 January 1986, [www.zeit.de/1986/06/die-kunst-des-kuendens](http://www.zeit.de/1986/06/die-kunst-des-kuendens) (accessed 18 December, 2017).

<sup>97</sup> See note 34, Genesis P-Orridge, "To Be Ex-Dream", 155-156.



to violence. Infantilism in punk can thus be seen as an idealized concept, but only to the degree that punk's overall negative views of contemporaneous society, and indeed of human nature, are taken into account. Idealization is thus reinforced through tragic romanticism, indicating that the child's qualities will never be allowed to unfold in a bitter reality. There is an echo of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Romantic child in punk's infantilism, a contraposition of infantile immediacy and naturalness vs. adult materiality and corruption. "We are the flowers in the dustbin", as Johnny Rotten sang.<sup>98</sup> Punk declares the cruelty of (grown-up) society and seeks a fragile escape in childishness. At its darkest, this defiance signals a complete negation, culminating in death. After all, in real life, there is only one way to never grow up.

[59] As a counter-model to this negation, DIY emerges as a more grounded (and thus, more optimistic) fighting spirit. In punk's DIY ethos, both infantilism and dilettantism correlate with independence, inventiveness, and impartiality. Artists and musicians denied the established hierarchy in order to uphold a childish approach towards their activity. Being childish was understood as being energetic, open, and curious. In the cases above, this is most prominently expressed in the concept of a "school of infantile art", where everyone is a director. That distribution of power also implies punk's (often rather abstract) ideal of anarchy. Additionally, infantilism was sometimes used as a simple way of getting attention and breaking taboos. In one of his first manifestos, Malcolm McLaren wrote: "Be childish. Be irresponsible. Be disrespectful. Be everything this society hates."<sup>99</sup> The identification as a pronounced revolt of the *youth* also reverberates in this statement. The *enfants terribles* of punk art were thus attempting to avoid assimilation.

[60] In the conceptualizations of both infantilism and dilettantism, the connections between punk and Dada and Surrealism become apparent. These links might be seen in such components as the integration of coincidence and error, the fragmentation of process, and childhood as escape as well as the substitution of *play* for *work*. Furthermore, punk was as much a way of living as it was a way of making art or music. It was about everyday performance. This attitude coincides with the twentieth-century avant-garde notion of breaking down the barriers between art and life. Other points of intersection include marginal themes and taboos (death, crime, pain), sloganeering, poetic radicalism, the use of aliases, bodily transgressions and modifications, word/image juxtapositions, and emphasis on collective activity (fig. 10). Related notions – autonomy, identification, imagination, isolation – deserve further study. Furthermore, the relationship with more immediate predecessors in the period of transition from the 1960s to the 1970s, such as Fluxus, Pop Art, and Neo-Dada, seems to provide ample points of comparison and likewise deserves further study.

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<sup>98</sup> Sex Pistols, *God Save the Queen* (Virgin Records, 1977).

<sup>99</sup> Malcolm McLaren, quoted in: Savage, *England's Dreaming*, 44.



10 (Left) Marcel Duchamp, *Tonsure*, 1919 or 1921, photograph Man Ray, 8.8 x 7.8 cm. Collection Sylvio Perlstein, Antwerp (© Man Ray Trust/ ADAGP, Paris / VG Bildkunst, Bonn). (Right) Wolfgang Müller, *Untitled (self-portrait)*, 1980, Polaroid, 10.6 x 8.8 cm (courtesy Wolfgang Müller)

[61] There are two significant differences between these avant-garde precursors and punk. One is the effect of punk on mainstream youth culture (and subcultural youth culture). Viewed in an art historical context or compared to avant-gardist movements from the 1910s to the 1960s, the (desired and undesired) media and societal attention to punk is unsurpassed (perhaps with the one exception of Andy Warhol and his Factory). The second difference is the radicalness of punk's discard of progress. "The rationale of progress is obsolete", as Wolfgang Müller wrote in *Geniale Dilletanten*.<sup>100</sup> Punk was thus no avant-garde in the sense of artists "leading the way", after all, their proposition was NO FUTURE. The elitist overtone of the term avant-garde also clashes with the punk movement's self-view. In one indicative example from Copenhagen, a group of punks called themselves *Bagtropper* (Rear-guards) in response and opposition to an event-series called *Fortropper* (Avant-gardes), in which some protagonists from the scene had participated.<sup>101</sup> Figuratively and in this context, the rear guards would not only be the ones who trail behind, but also those who protect the weakest, for example, in the case of the ANUS gallery at the beginning of this article.

[62] Progress, however, might be "the ultimate mystification behind post-industrial Western society itself", as Greil Marcus observed.<sup>102</sup> The rejection of progress was thus part of what was perceived as alarming about punk art (and the whole punk movement): a youth rebellion had been seen before, but one that refused to state its progressive claims, less so (if any art movement comes close,

<sup>100</sup> Müller, "Die wahren Dilletanten", 12.

<sup>101</sup> See Jan Poulsen, *Something Rotten! Punk i Danmark: Maleri, Musik og Litteratur*, Copenhagen 2010, 208.

<sup>102</sup> See note 40, Marcus, "Punk", n. p.

it would be Dada). Punk art's "not able and not willing" refusal to engage in the justification and explanation of itself is a refusal to contribute to *any* progress. This negation was expressed as a critique of careerism and pretentiousness, but also in a manifest distance towards moralism in art. *VILE*'s post-1984 "Happy Valentine" in 1974 and *Die Untergangsshow* in Berlin in 1981 are both examples of this jeering dismissal of progress. On a wider political and social level, the discernible end-of-the-world sentiment of the late 1970s and early 1980s was not met with remorse by the punks. Rather, they made it clear that they would be ready to dance on the grave of Western Civilization.

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