

Scissors and Glue:

Punk Fanzines and the Creation of a DIY Aesthetic

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The fanzine producer Chris Wheelchair (sic) remarked in the editorial of Ruptured Ambitions (1992) that his Plymouth-based fanzine is ‘all about helping promote the DIY punk/alternative/underground movement, which is, at present, extremely healthy in many areas, and certainly improving.’ From the early 1930s, fan magazines or ‘fanzines’ have been integral to the creation of a thriving communication network of underground culture, disseminating information and personal views to like-minded individuals on subjects from music and football to anti-capitalism and thrift store shopping. Yet, it remains within the subculture of punk music where the homemade, A4, stapled and photocopied fanzines of the late 1970s fostered the ‘do-it-yourself’ (DIY) production techniques of cut-n-paste letterforms, photocopied and collaged images, hand-scrawled and typewritten texts, to create a recognizable graphic design aesthetic. The employment of such techniques and technologies has had an impact on an overall idiosyncratic and distinctive visual style affiliated with punk fanzines. For fanzine producers, the DIY process critiques mass production through the very handmade quality it embraces, but also in the process of appropriating the images and words of mainstream media and popular culture. Arguably, the DIY approach reached its peak in the 1990s and still continues today, having been co-opted into the worlds of commercial mainstream lifestyle magazines and advertising which trade on its association with punk authenticity. The intent of this essay is to explore the development of a graphic language of resistance and to examine the way in which the very use of its DIY production methods reflected the promotion of politics and music of 1970s’ punk and DIY underground activity. In addition, this piece will, through interviews with fanzine producers, attempt to recover from history an area of graphic design activity that has largely been ignored. This will be achieved by focusing on three punk fanzine titles that were initiated during the first wave of the punk period: Panache (Mick Mercer, 1976–1992), Chainsaw (Charlie Chainsaw, 1977–1985) and Ripped & Torn (Tony Drayton, 1976–1979). These examples will be measured against a discussion of Sniffin’ Glue (Mark Perry, 1976–1977), which has been acknowledged by the punk community as the first punk DIY fanzine in Britain.

Keywords: fanzines—graphic design—popular culture—publishing—punk—typography

Introduction

What is a fanzine?¹ The American writer and academic Stephen Duncombe describes fanzines as ‘little publications filled with rantings of high weirdness and exploding with chaotic design’ where the producers

‘privilege the ethic of DIY, do-it-yourself: make your own culture and stop consuming that which is made for you’.² For Duncombe, fanzines represent not only a ‘shared creation’ of a producer’s own, often alternative, culture but also a ‘novel form of communication’.³ In particular it is worth noting Duncombe’s

reference to the ‘chaotic design’ of the fanzine page and use of the term ‘chaotic’ in relationship to the development of a graphic language of resistance. Later he refers to the layout of the fanzines as ‘unruly cut-n-paste’ with barely legible type and ‘uneven reproduction’, drawing comparisons between ‘professional-looking publications’ and the fanzine as amateur, falling somewhere between ‘a personal letter and a magazine’.⁴

A plethora of fanzines emerged during the first wave of punk in Britain (1976–1979). This was a period of substantial cultural, social and political change where punk reacted against the ‘modern world’ and the absorption of ‘hippy culture’ into the mainstream. According to the cultural historian Roger Sabin, ‘Although punk had no set agenda like its hippie counter-cultural predecessor it did stand for certain identifiable attitudes. Among them an emphasis on working class “credibility”. A belief in various hues of class politics [notably anarchism] and an enthusiasm for spontaneity and doing it yourself’.⁵

Punk also reacted against the mid-1970s ‘hit parade’ rock music scene. The writer Henry Rollins reflects in his introduction to one punk musician’s memoirs, *The Andy Blade Chronicles*, that at this time ‘rock was boring, rock was damn near dead’.⁶ Punk music was seen as an alternative to the mainstream music industry and provided something new and liberating through its independent and ‘do-it-yourself’ approach. In addition, Julie Davies, writing in her 1977 book *Punk*, argues that ‘Punk Rock is a live experience; it has to be seen and heard live. Playing a record at home just doesn’t communicate the sheer energy, excitement and enthusiasm which are the hallmarks of the music’.⁷ Punk fanzines attempted to recreate the same buzz visually—an ethos encapsulated by the Sex Pistols who famously remarked in the *New Musical Express* ‘We’re not into music...we’re into chaos’.⁸

Fanzines adopted the DIY, independent approach that punk musicians had espoused. With the rise of newly formed bands came the establishment of impromptu clubs, small, independent record labels and record stores, including the London-based shop Rough Trade (which also distributed fanzines). In the same way, fanzines offered fans a ‘free space for developing ideas and practices’, and a visual space unencumbered by formal design rules and visual expectations.⁹ As one member of the community

reflects ‘our fanzines were always clumsy, unprofessional, ungrammatical, where design was due to inadequacy rather than risk’.¹⁰ As the plethora of punk-inspired fanzines materialized, a unique visual identity emerged, with its own set of graphic rules and a ‘do-it yourself’ approach neatly reinforcing punk’s new found ‘political’ voice. The Sex Pistols single release of ‘Anarchy in the UK’ (1976) summed up punk’s radical position where Malcolm McLaren, the self-proclaimed punk creator and Sex Pistol’s manager, was quick to point out, “‘Anarchy in the UK’ is a statement of self-rule, or ultimate independence, of do-it-yourself’.¹¹ As if to punctuate this point graphically, the producer of *Sideburns* (Brighton, 1976) famously provided a set of simple instructions and a diagram of how to play three chords—A, E, G—alongside the punk command ‘Now Form a Band’. As with its music and fashion, punk advocated that everyone go out and produce fanzines. As independent self-published publications, fanzines became vehicles of subcultural communication and played a fundamental role in the construction of punk identity and a political community.

As cultural mouthpieces for punk bands, fanzines disseminated information about gig schedules, interviews with bands and reviews of new albums alongside features on current political events and personal rants. They fostered an active dialogue with a community of like-minded individuals often evidenced through the readers’ pages of fanzines and also at the gigs themselves. As the American writer Greil Marcus suggests, punk was ‘a moment in time that took shape as a language anticipating its own destruction...it was a chance to create ephemeral events that would serve as judgements on whatever came next’.¹² Fanzines formed part of this fleeting cultural performance. Each in their own way contributed to the development of a distinct and enduring DIY graphic language of punk.

Sniffin’ Glue

The first punk fanzine to reflect the punk movement visually in Britain was Mark Perry’s *Sniffin’ Glue* (1976–1977) [1]. Mark P.’s *Sniffin’ Glue* is credited as the first British punk fanzine amongst punk historians such as Jon Savage, who writes: ‘Perry’s achievement was to unite for a brief time all the tensions—between art and commerce, between

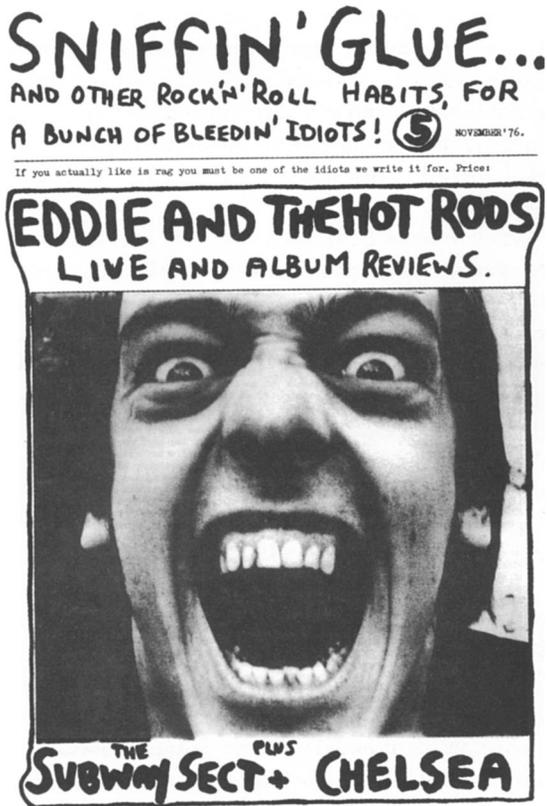


Fig 1. Cover. *Sniffin' Glue*, Nr. 5, November, 1976, London



Fig 2. Cover. *Murder by Fanzine* Nr. 2, c.1983, Ross-Shire, Scotland

avant-garde aesthetics and social realist politics—that eventually tore punk apart, and write them out in a sharp mix of emotion and intention that still makes his words fresh'.¹³ Others writing at the time, including Charlie Chainsaw, producer of the punk fanzine *Chainsaw*, who altered the form of his production just to differentiate his fanzine from the multitude of *Sniffin' Glue* 'look-a-likes' that had appeared so soon after its first issue.¹⁴ These attributes were the way in which the typewritten text was used with mistakes in spelling as well as cross-outs, all caps, handwritten graffiti text, photographs of bands used on two-thirds of the cover, and so forth.

Tributes to Mark P.'s success were even witnessed in the way the fanzine itself was referenced graphically. *Murder by Fanzine* Nr. 2 (c.1983, Ross-Shire, Scotland) for example, pastes a flyer promoting issue 6 of *Sniffin' Glue* and overlays it on the head of a guitar player thereby rendering him anonymous [2]. Despite this Mark P. is 'clear about refusing the "first

fanzine" tag and is careful to credit earlier rock-n-roll publications such as Greg Shaw's *Who Put the Bomb!*, *Crawdaddy* and Brian Hoggs' *Bam Balam*. He comments, 'I would like to claim that the idea of doing a fanzine on this new music was my own, but I can't because it wasn't. At the time there were loads of fanzines knocking about. Mostly on country music, R&B and the like'.¹⁵ *Sniffin' Glue* soon established itself as part of the evolutionary line of fanzine publishing by taking on what would become a characteristic approach to fanzine production with its A4, stapled, photocopied pages and layouts using handwritten and typewritten texts.

The title, *Sniffin' Glue: And Other Rock'n'roll Habits* was inspired by the Ramones' London gig and song 'Now I wanna sniff some glue'—a verse that is reprinted in Issue 1 (1976). Mark P. remarks that 'In this issue we lean heavily towards being a Ramones fan letter' and promises in future issues to cover 'other punks who make and do things we like'.¹⁶ *Sniffin'*

Glue was often abbreviated to SG and, while drawing upon earlier formats and content of the rock'n'roll publications, it did differ from its predecessors in that it defined itself from an insider's and working-class perspective on the burgeoning punk music scene in Britain. Issue 1 defined itself as 'for punks', as a mouthpiece for their music and anger. In Issue 4 he signs one review as 'Mark "angry young man" P.'. Also in Issue 4, collaborator Steve Mick writes '... punks have been telling us we've got the best mag around. Well, of course we have 'cause we're broke, on the dole and live at home in boring council flats, so obviously we know what's goin' on!' Mark P. left his job as a bank clerk and home in Deptford to start the fanzine. In true punk spirit, Mark Perry even shortened his surname to the letter 'P' in order to avoid the attention of the dole officers (as did many other fanzine producers at the time, including Tony Drayton (Tony D.) of *Ripped & Torn*). Produced initially in Mark P.'s back bedroom, *Sniffin' Glue* found a gap in the 'market' with an audience of like-minded punk music enthusiasts. His initial photocopy run was 50 but by the end of *Sniffin' Glue* in 1977 up to 10,000 were in circulation. Perry stopped producing *Sniffin' Glue* with number 12 (August/September 1977) about the same time that he suggests punk had been assimilated into the music industry.¹⁷ Like punk itself, fanzines moved from positions of independence to rapid co-option into the mainstream.

Sniffin' Glue was a true DIY production. Mark P. first put together the fanzine using a 'back to basics' approach with the main text typed out on an 'old children's typewriter'—a Christmas present from his parents when he was ten.¹⁸ Texts were used as they were written with grammatical and punctuation corrections made visible in crossing outs. This stressed the immediacy of its production and of the information, but also the transparency of the design and journalistic process itself. Mark P. advertises subscriptions at '£1.40 for four issues and paid with postal orders only' (Issue 3 ½: 4), although this was not a cost effective measure when the cover price of each issue was 10p. At the time the cost of photocopying was 3 pence per sheet and most issues average 12 pages. Mark P. and other producers obtained free copies by using copiers found in their workplace or through friends' jobs. *Sniffin' Glue*, for example, was produced on Mark P.'s girlfriend's office copier.¹⁹

Unlike publishers of some of the later fanzines, Mark P. kept production simple, using only single-sided copies, with an occasional inclusion of a pin-up page of punk band members (e.g. Chelsea or Brian Chevett of Eater), double-sided and backed by an advertisement for a Sex Pistols gig or an independent record shop.

Mark P. had developed his own brand of DIY 'punk journalism' and encouraged others to participate actively in 'having a go yourself'. *Sniffin' Glue's* readership was primarily other fans who purchased copies, amongst other places, in London's Compendium bookstore (Camden) and through Bizarre Books (Paddington). Mark P. was also very much aware of his new found position as punk provocateur and of the influence he had on other fanzine producers. Even in Issue 3 of *Sniffin' Glue*, Mark P. comments that the back issues had already 'SOLD OUT! Collectors items already?' In a special edition of Q magazine (April 2002), Mark P. reflects that '*Sniffin' Glue* was the best rock magazine in the world bar none, because it was so connected to what it was writing about'.²⁰ Mark P. also speculates that his fanzine was successful because it was unlike other fanzines, in that *Sniffin' Glue* was 'more discerning than the others'. He felt that other fanzines said what was fashionable rather than being honest and telling readers exactly what they thought.²¹

A Graphic Language of Resistance

But what does the DIY aesthetic that emerged in fanzines such as *Sniffin' Glue* actually represent? Before turning to a more detailed discussion of other punk fanzine titles, it is worth exploring what a 'graphic language of resistance' in contemporary Western culture means: is it even possible to characterize it in any systematic way? Language, according to cultural historian Mikko Lehtonen, is essentially abstract and exists only through certain material forms such as 'writing, photographs, movies, newspapers and magazines, advertisements and commercials'.²² These are conduits through which meaning is conveyed and where signs which stand for 'mental concepts' are arranged into languages. Just as grammars and syntax are created through written or spoken language so too might be the structures of visual language. The semioticians Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen observe a shift taking place in the 'era of late

modernity' from a dominance of 'monomodality', a singular communication mode, to 'multimodality', which embraces a 'variety of materials and to cross the boundaries between the various art, design and performance disciplines'.²³ Language may be communicated through verbal or non-verbal means, or a combination thereof. The grammars of design operate in the same way as the grammars of semiotic modes and may be codified. The music historian Dave Laing, for example, comments that punk language drew upon discourses found in the areas of pornography, left-wing politics and obscenity. Explicit sexual words such as 'cunt' and swearing such as using the word 'fuck' permeated the lyrics of punk songs, performances on stage and in the pages of fanzines.²⁴ All these facets incorporated an explicit and violent use of language as part of a general shock tactic strategy meant to offend and draw attention to punk itself. The DIY approach to fanzine production ensured the menacing nature of the words in the use of cut-up ransom note lettering.

For punk fanzines, language is communicated graphically through a system of visual signs and specifically in the conveyance of a message of 'resistance'. In the essay 'Rethorizing Resistance', Beverly Best examines the way in which the popular cultural text functions on 'behalf of oppositional cultural and political practice'. Best argues in a similar way to Michel Foucault that there 'cannot be power relations *without* resistances, and that the latter are real and effective because they are formed at the point where power relations are exercised'.²⁵ Punk fanzines are sites for oppositional practice in that they provide a forum for cultural communication as well as for political action, which should be included in any broader political discourse. George McKay observes that British punk may be considered as a 'cultural moment of resistance' and part of a DIY culture that 'activism means action'.²⁶ It is the self-empowerment component of a do-it-yourself culture where direct action begins.

Yet, what of a 'graphic language of resistance'? *The Oxford Modern English Dictionary* defines 'resistance' as the 'act of resisting'; a 'refusal to comply', for example as might be defined as in resisting authority.²⁷ Duncombe, editor of the *Cultural Resistance Reader*, suggests that through the process of resistance we are freed from the 'limits and constraints of the dominant culture'. In turn, 'cultural resistance' allows us to

'experiment with new ways of seeing and being and develop tools and resources for resistance'.²⁸ This may be represented either through content, graphically or both, where rules and prescriptions are disregarded intentionally. Michael Twyman establishes that the 'language element in graphic communication' is the relationship between information content and visual presentation, which he suggests must take into account a number of factors including the 'users of language' and 'the circumstances of use'.²⁹ Twyman is also clear in his argument about the role technological developments have in relation to the 'language of the messages that need to be communicated'. He suggests that the three major means of production—the manuscript age, the printed age and the electronic age, provide different forms, and, 'we have, therefore, to ask ourselves how each of these different forms can be made to respond to our needs'.³⁰

Such a distinction is useful for a study of fanzines. In this case, the use of handwriting or typewritten texts maintains a similar function in terms of language while the 'graphic treatment responds to the particular technology being used'.³¹ 'Graphic language' is a visual system incorporating not only image-based symbols but also a typographic language. The way in which graphic language is depicted will add value to its intended meaning. For example, Stuart Mealing, writing in *Visible Language*, has observed that 'font styles and parameters such as size and color are selected to lend additional interpretive potential to plain text message.' This is formalized by using salient elements including italics, bold, underlined, capital letters, fonts, size and weight, etc., but also through the way images and texts are juxtaposed and presented in order to extend visually 'the semantic potential of a message'.³² Such acts of resistance are normally 'shared' and in the process provide a 'focal point' and help to establish a community of like-minded individuals. Such a community is often considered as subcultural, borne out of a resistance to a dominant or parent culture, and seen as 'subordinate, subaltern or subterranean'.³³

The 'Art' of Punk

Punk arguably represented the politics of the working-class experience,³⁴ but also the more 'artful' 'aesthetics of proletarian play', and was also middle-class in that there was significant art school input.³⁵ Malcolm

Garrett, for example, states that he was introduced to techniques of collage, stencilling, use of Letraset and the photocopier while at college. His own fanzine *Today's Length* (one issue, 1980), concocted with Joe Ewart and others, reflects this. He was also associated with punk performer and artist Linder, whose own collages were profiled on the cover of the Buzzcock's first single *Orgasm Addict* (1977), and Peter Saville whose own references were visible on *OK UK Streets*, a single for Manchester-based punk group The Smirks (1978). Garrett remarks 'punk really stood out, there was a sense of hostility on the street, and you felt a sense of energy which was aggressive in expression'.³⁶

Out of this connection emerged a language of graphic resistance steeped in the first instance in the ideology of punk and its anarchical spirit and in the second instance, that which emerged from their position in a continuous timeline of self-conscious Dadaist and Situationist International 'art' practices.³⁷ According to Guy Debord, Situationist International promoted the notion that contemporary society had become the 'society of the spectacle', opposing this by employing strategies such as that defined by *détournement* (diversion) and of 'recuperation' (recovery) including commandeered comic-strip imagery and other popular culture forms. This is exemplified by fanzine producer and Pogues' frontman Shane MacGowan, who admits in his publication *Bondage* (Issue 1, 1976), 'this whole thing was put together... with the help of a box of safety pins. All the photos are ripped out of other mags'.³⁸

The Sex Pistols' art director Jamie Reid had an interest in Situationist International and its antecedents including Dada and Futurism. Along with self-proclaimed punk historian Malcolm McLaren, Reid was a member of the English Situationist group King Mob while an art student at Croydon College of Art in the late 1960s. His early affiliation with Situationist International writings was established and, in 1974, Reid and McLaren helped to publish Christopher Gray's anthology *Leaving the 20th Century*. Reid's own publication (co-produced with Jeremy Brook and Nigel Edwards) titled *Suburban Press* (Issue 1, 1970) played tribute to the agit-prop collage-style illustrations, cartoons and DIY production techniques he had been exposed to in the flyers, handbills and early Situationist works. Such techniques had become synonymous with the radical politics of student pro-

tests of 1968. Reid's approach, and those of subsequent punk fanzine producers drew upon these techniques in order to establish a specific visual immediacy to their message. Ultimately this process provided an identifiable DIY aesthetic unapologetic for its raw and amateur production quality.

Many producers, whether knowingly or not, often combined a graphic language of 'resistance' instigated as a result of Situationists' *King Mob Echo* (c.1968), Jamie Reid's *Suburban Press* (1970) and Mark P.'s *Sniffin' Glue*'s seemingly fresh punk attitude. Richard Reynolds, for example, in his 'post punk poetry' fanzine *Scumbag* (1980–1981, 1988) drew on *Sniffin' Glue* as well as Wyndham Lewis' *BLAST!* and the language of concrete poetry.³⁹ On the other hand, it would be misleading to suggest that all fanzine producers were aware of these specific traditions. *Panache* (London 1976–1991) producer Mick Mercer comments, 'I started in '76. There was only *Sniffing* [sic] *Glue* and *Ripped and Torn*, and I hadn't seen either. I just kept it simple and did what I liked'.⁴⁰