Visual Arts

The graphics of punk: cool, loud, in yer face

New York hosts an explosive show of visuals from the movement and its aftermath

The works for the show are mostly stuck on the walls, unframed, in all their vivid, Warholian, postmodern joy © Andrew Krivine; PD Rearick

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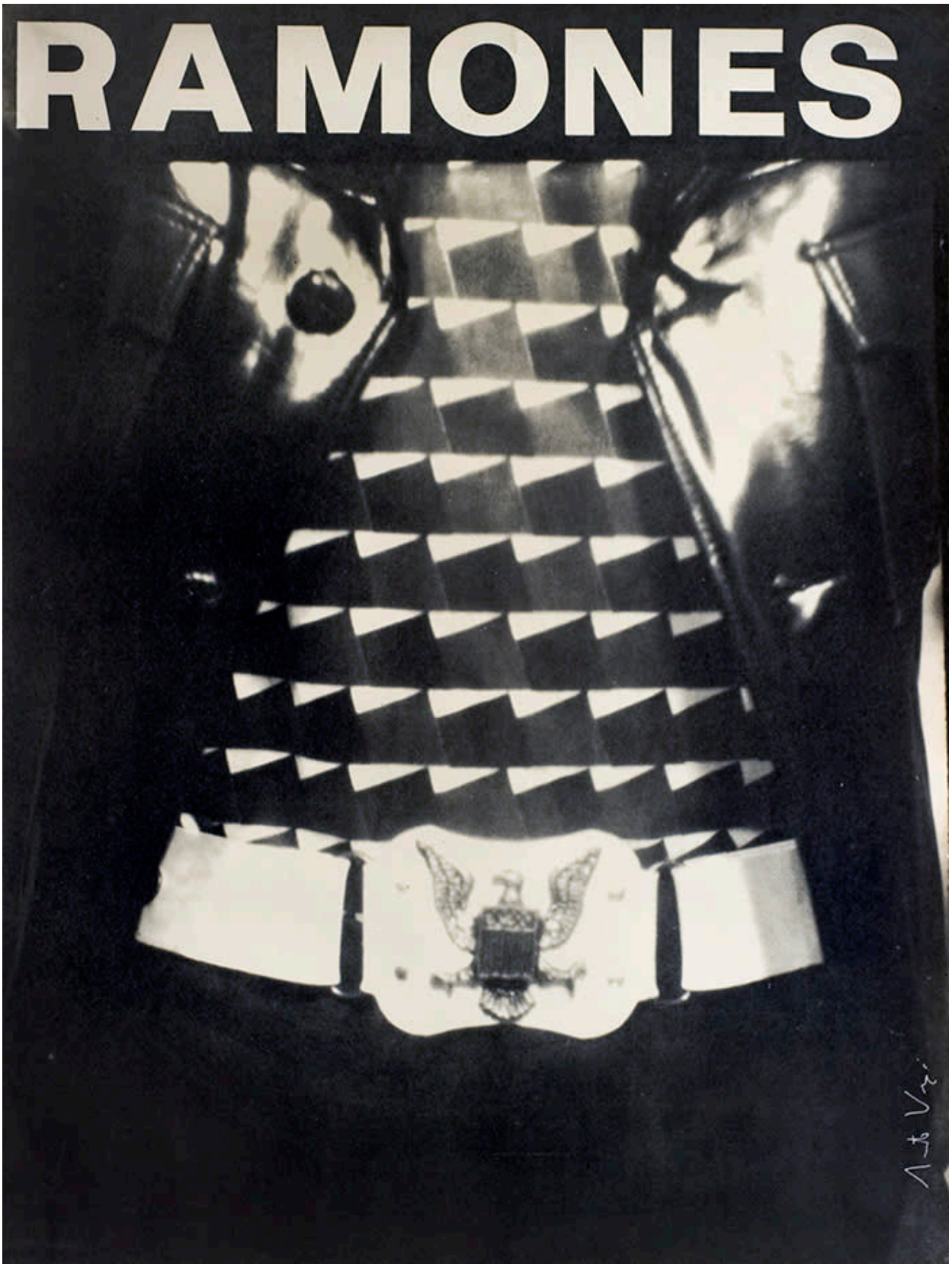
Well, it turns out there *was* a future in England's dreaming. And it's splashed all over the walls of the Museum of Arts and Design in New York. Punk may have been one of the shortest-lived moments in pop, but its afterlife has lingered. The cut-out ransom-note lettering of the Sex Pistols, the B-movie horror imagery of The Cramps and The Damned, and the black-and-white electric shocks of Lou Reed and Richard Hell have become a part of our visual language: disposable, deliberately cheap and nasty photocopied flyers preserved in perpetuity.

Too Fast to Live, Too Young to Die: Punk Graphics, 1976—1986 pulls punk's long tail, stretching a moment that lasted a couple of years out to a decade and transforming the museum's white walls into a suburban teenager's bedroom. You can almost sniff the glue, pogo through the flob.

At first glance it looks very different from MAD's usual fare of ceramics and jewellery. Yet this vibrant display of hundreds of graphic works represents a democratisation of graphic media that arguably acted as a precursor to a contemporary culture in which anyone with a laptop can be a graphic designer.

In some ways, it's a riot of defunct media: album and seven-inch sleeves; club flyers; fanzines, a survey of a lost world of bedroom cut and pasting. But in elongating punk to embrace new wave, no wave, post punk, psychobilly — frankly, we could have had more psychobilly — Ted revival, ska, electronica and the rest, we get a picture of an explosive graphic scene that established the look for contemporary culture.

The show bestrides the Atlantic, kicking off with scrappy flyers mixing mugshot portraits with hand-lettered gig notices for gritty but arty US acts (Lou Reed, Patti Smith and Television) and pub rock posters for UK journeymen such as The Pirates, whose gritty guitar rock would meld into blasts of distorted punk. In terms of graphics, it is deliberately underpowered, encompassing bits of Oz cartoons, hippie-festival handouts and frat-party flyers.


RAMONES

Then in comes Jamie Reid. Friend of Malcolm McLaren and somehow fuzzily associated with the French situationists, Reid's cut-out letters on dayglo backgrounds gave punk the perfect nihilist image: existential unrest on paper. The British monarch got a jubilee silver safety pin through her mouth in Reid's 1977 poster for the Sex Pistols' "God Save the Queen" — and the style was set.

But, as if all those amphetamines had accelerated its rebellious teenage years, by the following year the spit-soaked end of punk, the torn T-shirt, bin-bag and safety-pin garbage aesthetic had already grown up. The Sex Pistols split and Johnny Rotten reverted to being John Lydon and formed an avant-garde concept band.

That was fast. It would have made a good show on its own, an exposition of the faux and the real amateurism of graphic experimentation. But the best work here is from the designers who followed in the wake, who mined the archives to find subversive styles and co-opted them to professionalise a post-punk, new-wave world.

The most striking is the vivid array from British designer Barney Bubbles, an odd, publicity-shy figure whose work for Elvis Costello, Ian Dury & The Blockheads and others dominates the walls in its vivid, Warholian, postmodern joy. There is also, of course, Reid and his situationist *détournements* (the hijacking and reuse of imagery and culture), the West Coast punk cartoons of Raymond Pettibon, the unsettling feminist body bricolage of Linder Sterling (for Buzzcocks) and the Pomo constructivism of Malcolm Garrett.

It's a little jarring, in this context, to see Peter Saville's super-modern and exquisite designs. which seem to come from a very different place. If anything, the show tries to shoehorn too much in, encompassing the kitchen-sink Smiths covers, the tongue-in-cheek 1950s revival of the B-52's and the 1960s chequerboards of ska revival and the mods. Yet the rapid transformation of a nihilist explosion of distorted guitar chords and violent graphics into a profoundly political, activist moment is strikingly revealed. There are posters for Rock Against Racism, the Anti-Nazi League and the anarcho-punk collectivism of Crass (two of whom were graphic designers). The other side — the nastier, far-right expression of punk, the skinhead bands and the movement's glib fondness for Nazi symbols — is conspicuously absent.

The entire collection, incredibly, comes from a single owner, Andrew Krivine, who is also the author of a 2015 book on punk graphics. Most endearingly, it is not treated as art, in part thanks to the museum's director, Christopher Scoates, who was at art school in the UK in the 1970s and remembers the gigs. Rather, it is mostly stuck, unframed, on the walls, just as it would have been in that suburban teenager's bedroom.

Direct, graphically striking, surprising and — at least for us middle-aged nostalgics — it is an absolute joy, like opening the shutters to a record store in which everything from your youth is intact, from a time when album covers and graphics really did represent everything.

To August 18, madmuseum.org

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