

2.4. You can't blow up a symbolic relationship: spectacular and physical resistance of punk

Donal Fullam¹

Abstract

In Dublin punk intersects with many forms of artistic and cultural production - a collective practice space is home to a screenprinting workshop, gym, literature distribution and hosts film nights and other group activity. Tenterhooks, an autonomous DiY space, provides a venue for music performance, band practice, as well as art and community events. The conviction that anyone, of any skill level, should have access and be able to express themselves musically or otherwise mirrors the wider conviction that politics shouldn't be something removed, but an everyday process, embodied and material. DiY punk is a means to decolonise everyday life in a physical, non symbolic way - through self organisation, a politics of emancipation and methods of interaction that avoid subordination of others. Performative fabrication of identity through style is employed but there are other means of identification - use of non-hierarchical organisation models, international solidarity and being "active" are modes of interaction and expression that characterise contemporary translocal punk scenes. Music is a lynchpin for community members, an aesthetic nucleus to orbit, but also a communally created practice through which it is possible to transform space. While contemporary media corporations continue the kind of culture industry appropriation Dick Hebdige identified this is just one fragment of the narrative - punk is a community of style but, more critically, it is a community of praxis and poiesis organised around musical style. This paper draws on ethnographic information gained through a decade of participation within Dublin's underground punk scene - research is based on ethnology, participant observation as an active scene member, and case studies on autonomous social spaces.

Keywords: punk, diy, spectacle.

You can't blow up a symbolic relationship: spectacular and physical resistance of punk

Frederic Jameson said that we are at a point where it's easier to imagine the end of the world than an end to capitalism, an impasse Mark Fisher describes as emerging from the lived ideological framework of capitalist realism. Fisher characterises this roadblock as a cultural and political malaise in which it seems impossible to imagine a future different from the present as pervasive cynicism and a cultural logic that proclaims there is no alternative have taken hold (Fisher, 2014). When everything is commodified, art becomes content and the past is objectified as disposable nostalgia when context and the realities of praxis are lost.

The dominant globalised version of punk seems to be imagined and reified alternatively as an ahistoric simulacrum or the spectacular image of youth rebellion that quickly spread internationally as a hegemonic cultural export and imploded sometime in the past but this characterisation is contested through the work of contemporary popular musicologists, ethnomusicologists, sociologists and others. While punk may now be imagined and described within academic circles as praxis and something closer to the aspirations of its constituents, complex striations of community, ideology and practice belie any tidy explanation or hagiographic representation. Punk is yellow and neon pink album covers emblazoned with inflammatory language, a spectacle of boots and bondage but it's also somehow the antithesis to the society of the spectacle, desperately scrambling for a way out. Punk is an international network of DiY musicians, artists and collectives but it is also the apparent rebellion of a youth culture long ago annexed as a component of consumer capitalism. The Clash were inducted into the Rock and Roll hall of fame in 2003, John Lydon appeared in an advertisement for Country Life butter, Green Day's 1994 album Dookie has sold 20 million copies. Artifacts from the deepest subterranean caverns of punk have been unearthed and sold, solidifying its place in the museum of popular culture - Lady Gaga appeared in a studded jacket hand painted with Doom and Gism logos in the video for Telephone. Quickly identified as prey for a predatory culture

¹ University College Dublin, Ireland.

industry, contradictory narratives were obscured or reified as images of themselves, first trivialised and then incorporated, neutralising any possibility of dissent.

Anarcho punk

In the beginning punk was appropriated in divergent ways. The most obvious divergence might not accurately be described as appropriation because punk was in many ways originally a media and music industry creation; an image of rebellion for sale, a method perfected after it became established with the emergence of rock and roll. Punk became a commodified product very soon after it gained massive public attention during the middle of the 1970s and with this attention the style was propelled around the globe through the mobilising power of capital. But while this commodification was occurring dissident groups in the UK appropriated punk for contrary purposes, understanding that its central message, that anyone could do it, was empowering and could be a vehicle for the dissemination of autonomist ideas removed from punk's spectacular image. Crass, Flux of Pink Indians, Chumbawumba, Subhumans, Poison Girls, Conflict and others affiliated with anarcho punk helped to politicise the form and opened up possibilities for a diverse interpretation of punk "as a movement rather than simply an outrageous fashion statement" (Glasper, 2006, p. 12). At the same time disparate groups around the world were coming to the same conclusion and asserting the primacy of punk as an agent of political subversion (Cross, 2010).

Anarcho-punk emerged before the disintegration of the wider subculture through the music and actions of a number of loosely affiliated bands during the late 1970s. The conclusions arrived at by those involved mirrored the assumptions of many others around the world who came into contact with punk - that it could be a viable platform for ideological propagation. What crystallised within anarcho punk and the underground punk movements that appeared around the globe was a culture of DiY, in which it became understood that approach is everything and that if the medium defines the message then the means of production or at least distribution must be grasped, however limited. This meant bands releasing their own records, creating their own promotion and publication, creating spaces to put on gigs - novel concepts in the 1970s but still widely adhered to. Within punk, DiY activity is seen as indivisible from the political-cultural project through which it's enthused (Cross, 2010) - this branch of punk favours visible direct action over the indirect strategy of expressing 'resistance' via style (Clark, 2003). While punk in Dublin isn't some kind of egalitarian anarchist society it's methods are an expression of tangents found within this strand of political theory.

Karate klub

The Karate Klub is a band practice space in Phibsboro organised by a non-profit collective that's been running since October in 2007. Situated at the back of a Victorian terrace across the road from St. Peter's church the space is a 1000 square foot industrial unit that originally housed a small karate training centre which closed down sometime around 2005. A soundproof room was built inside the concrete section that faces the alleyway by the initial practice space members and another, larger room is used for storage and other activities; a weekly gym, occasional film nights, screen printing and gig after parties, although not a lot happens apart from band practice during the winter. The collective currently consists of twenty seven members who pay rent every six months, organise cleaning and make other decisions about how the space is run. Organisation is non-hierarchical and democratic - when decisions need to be made meetings are called and problems resolved through consensus. Nine men and two women were involved in the beginning, membership numbers have grown and fluctuated and now there are nineteen - fifteen men and four women. The demographic proportion is roughly the same but a statistical ratio doesn't indicate involvement - there is no obligation for Karate Klub members to do anything other than pay their share of the rent every six months, everything else is entirely voluntary. If someone doesn't want to go to meetings or contribute in any other way they don't have to and many are happy to pay and practice. People who are more interested in punk or are more ideologically impelled tend to be the most involved.

Ian Moran points out that "being involved in the punk movement means being active. Freedom of expression is extremely important but in order for the punk movement to survive it is necessary for individuals to actively participate and take on specific roles within the punk community" (Moran, 2011). These roles are generally creative - writing and producing zines, making artwork, printing t-shirts, posters and fliers and playing in bands are just a few. There are other essential roles - people organise spaces to create and play music - and also less obvious ancillary

activities; operating the sound desk at gigs, driving equipment, driving bands on tour, organising sporadic social events and parties, putting on benefit gigs that fundraise inside and outside punk, for punk spaces but also associated groups - pro-choice, migrant support, anti-fascist or animal rights, to name a few. One of the most important activities that has sustained punk that many historical commentators seem to have missed is creating and organising spaces, either in previously established commercial areas - usually pubs in Dublin - but also autonomous or least self organised spaces.

On Tenterhooks

Tenterhooks is a small venue beside the Dublin Food Co Op on Newmarket square that has a capacity of about 70 - 80 people, which generally suits the kind of events that take place there. Since October 2014 they've hosted bands from all over Ireland, the UK, Scotland, America, Canada, France, Sweden and more, mostly punk but also trad, noise, pop, various genres of metal, radical trans poetry and other uncategorisable genres. It's also regularly used as a band practice space and has hosted other events - an occasional Irish language workshop as well as film and food nights. On their Facebook page Tenterhooks is described as "a new D.I.Y. space in dublin which aims to provide an affordable venue for gigs, band practice and art and community events." There is a volunteer group page with more description of the group's aims - "Tenterhooks is an autonomous DIY social space in Dublin city. We are a small collective dedicated to creating an open affordable space that can be used for gigs, classes, exhibitions and tons of other cool events." Playing music in autonomous venues and squats, recording and releasing music with a DiY approach and connecting lyrics to liberatory messages are all part of a larger project of creating and maintaining space where these ideas can be tested and acted on. Simon Critchley describes this kind of political engagement as praxis "in a situation that articulates an interstitial distance from the state and allows for the emergence of new political subjects who exert a universal claim" (Critchley, 2014). DiY in punk can be defined as the attempt to create interstitial space as a reflection of the politics and practices created through divergent encounters with the phenomenon.

Chaos and contradictions

Contradictions remain apparent - some of the most popular bands within the global DiY punk scene rely on the effects of reification and a kind of modernist impulse towards abstraction. Raw punk is crude and incredibly noisy; adherents use a strategy of aesthetic transgression through extreme sonic regress. These are also strategies that a community can use to make its expressions and artifacts less commodifiable - if the sonics are impenetrable then the culture is impenetrable. One Dublin punk described this process as making a photocopy of a photocopy, degrading the image as a way to become less accessible to outsiders while valuing the degradation - "music so obscenely abrasive that it's not music anymore for most people." This is a process that tacitly accepts the distinction between high and low culture and, contrary to previous assertions, firmly places the artist within the realm of the low. Be Bop has been described as possessing a "willfully harsh, anti-assimilationist sound," (Baraka, 1963, p. 181) and certain branches of punk evolved a similar strategy but in the exact opposite direction, towards a baffling crudity and a retrogressive sonic morass. So, in an effort to avoid incorporation, the image of punk as chaotic mayhem is pushed to an acoustic extreme, in a reliance on aesthetics as transgressor that blighted punk's first wave. Punk music and fashion have always been commodified and subsumed, like the mods and rockers before, by an industry well versed in the amalgamation of subcultural aesthetics. What I mean by the title of this paper is that symbolic resistance through style or aesthetics is in some way ineffectual because style, whether it's fashion or musical, is so easily appropriated, incorporated and neutralised. So you can't blow it up, or you can't affect things politically within these realms - resistance must come from physical or organisational means.

There's a profound dichotomy - whether punk, as a popular music, is a typical product of consumer culture or is it something more "authentic"; that is a community construction, rooted in experience not necessarily subject to the market and reproduced according to something other than monetary logic. And the truth is it's both of these things - as Mimi Thi Nguyen pointed out it's pluralistic, a moving target (Nguyen, 2015). This pluralism means that punk isn't necessarily resistant, in many ways it operates as a refraction of prevailing tendencies and becomes simply a way to signify difference, or express underground credibility - the spectacular surface and the perceived negative characteristics of punk that predominantly received any sort of academic attention. Punk in Dublin is a community

and like any contemporary urban community it's pluralistic, fractured, overlapping and constantly in flux. Community membership is broadly defined and nebulous due to the plurality of ways punk is characterised by 'members' and affiliates and the historical representation through mainly sociological theory but also spectacular media representation. Stereotypes tend to dominate when the subject has been reified and where the systematisation of theory institutes processes of terminal elision. Mimi Thi Nguyen said that punk has been rendered illegitimate and dismissed as "the idle noise of adolescent attitude, as if this was nothing at all" (Thi Nguyen, 2013) but one of the the problems associated with academic study is that it can lend legitimacy to an object that resists legitimacy, transforming it into a form of intellectual capital.

A certain level of wariness exists for some within the Dublin punk scene towards academic study; this wariness comes from a suspicion about use of the material, a perceived exploitative nature that isn't necessarily malicious but which also doesn't contribute significantly to the community. This impression doesn't seem to be shared by many others but when I discuss it with them it is recognised and admitted as a possible reaction. This is a fear of "academisation" or the institutional power associated with academic writing that Mimi Thi Nguyen describes as having the power to discipline its subjects through "archival erasures" and a reification that robs its object of "its inherent instability." This instability is wielded as an important facet of punk, a facet that maintains its pluralism and the power that comes from the undefinable. Can we damage punk by recontextualising it in an academic setting? Appropriation and incorporation of subcultural style and aesthetics has been traditionally described as a strategy utilised by a rampaging culture industry but there's another kind of incorporation that sometimes creates anxiety in the punk scene - institutional incorporation through academia. The academisation of punk might mean presenting simple ideas in a confounding way, when, conversely, media portrayals tend to characterise an image that sheds much of the context that gives a subculture its significance. Much has already been covered regarding the commodification and commercialisation of subcultures but anxiety at the prospect of academisation and an institutional power associated with academic writing that is perceived to discipline its subject is something I've begun to explore - a contemporary form of potential incorporation or something more benign? Thi Nguyen identifies the problem - "punk is plural, rather than a coherent series of forms or formations, than can and should resist institutionalisation. Attempts to describe punk are always partial because punk is a moving target" (Thi Nguyen, 2013).

Punk and the idea of subcultures in general are still often understood from the top down through orthodox sociological frameworks of media effects, the passive consumption of leisure, class characteristics and identity through an analysis of texts and cultural artifacts seemingly due in large part to the huge influence Dick Hebdige had with *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. This semiotic neutralisation conceals another important narrative vector - that punk occurred in reaction to and was informed by the deep contradictions that appear within the core of market driven democracies and that punk is as much praxis as well as style, appearing as spectacular, creative, and imaginative disturbance but also collective and community activities. Sustaining informal global distribution networks, attending free gigs in reclaimed space or non profit community centres as expressions of cooperation and solidarity allows participants to imagine their actions as part of a wider, collective action. In 2015 these strands of Punk are attempts to create and sustain spaces that are not at a remove but at a distance from prevailing economic and cultural logic. Punk isn't necessarily radical, not all versions of punk say anything different but there are palpable shards that attempt a connection with struggles for imaginative and physical space as an antidote to the eternal now that arises from the cultural logic of late capitalism.

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