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THE GENRE FORMERLY KNOWN AS “PUNK”:
A QPOC’S PERSPECTIVE ON THE SCENE

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Abstract

This video is a visual representation of the frustrations that I suffered from when I, a queer, gender non-conforming, person of color, went to “pasty normals” (a term defined by Jose Esteban Munoz to describe normative, non-exotic individuals) to get a definition of what Punk meant and where I fit into it. In this video, I personify the Punk music movement. Through my actions, I depart from the grainy, low-quality, amateur aesthetics of the Punk film and music genres and create a new world where the Queer Person of Color defines Punk. In the piece, Punk definitively says, “Don’t try to define me. Shut up and leave me to rest.”

1 Conceptualization

My project will be an experimental performance video that incorporates monologues, performances, visual sound elements, and still and moving images. I will use this format to support the theory that Punk artists, in the way in which they use a stage, opening monologues, and costume to reject the dominant discourse surrounding Capitalism, Democracy, and Citizenship, take on the role of the queer subversive performance artist each time that they perform live. In his work, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color And The Performance Of Politics*, Jose Esteban Munoz' interacts with queer theater performers such as Jack Smith, and specifically redefines the role of the queer person of color and puts them at the center of his new world. Punk artists would then fall into his counterexample, the pasty normal. In breaking down the definition of this term, Munoz says:

"The "normal" in "pasty normal" might then be described as "normativity", as in Michael Warner's influential neologism "heternormativity."..."But what of the "pasty" in the "pasty normal" equation? In the Smith cosmology, *pasty* would be the opposite of exotic. I want to suggest that Smith's phrase is meant to index "whiteness" or, more nearly, *white normativity*."

In the same way that queer performance artists such as Vaginal Davis transform their bodies using punk-influenced drag, Punk musicians themselves don leather, chains, plaids, and hair dye to escape their majority pasty white bodies to become commentators on the state of society and to facilitate their own exclusion from the social machine. I am using this format because much like this experimental genre, Punk behaves outside of established norms. Performance artists like Davis work in experimental genres and make their own rules out of the broken pieces of the social rules that they reject.

Much like Punk artists, Davis uses her physical body and the human voice to invert the dominant social discourse in order to promote her own agenda. In *Dejecta/Protecta* (2011), Davis says, “Capitalism is the legitimate grip of the ruling class. Democracy only works if you know how to play Monopoly.” The primary discourse that I will focus on in the Punk music scene is the way in which Punk rejected the notions of Capitalism and Democracy and instead instituted their own form of Economics. The value of the Punk scene, as dictated by its members, was not driven by dollars, which were as useless to them as paper Monopoly money, but by social value. The social capital of this community cannot be measured in a comprehensive, linear manner. There aren’t necessarily monetary numbers to be crunched that can tell a direct story. However, by pulling in alternative methods of story telling and analysis, it is possible to measure the worth of this scene. This worth lies in the experimental composition of songs, the unconventional code to which Punk-identified people abide, and the deep reaching influence of the music produced.

I set out to engage the theories of community formation that we discussed in the course Media and Sexuality. When talking about Munoz, we discussed the act of breaking away from social and group norms for personal safety and survival. During the late 70s and early 80s, there was much violence and death due to Punk on Punk crime, particularly in the suburbs. Many of the Punk bands whose influences I am measuring, as well as many Punk-identified youths in the 80s, came together as a form of gangs. As the band The Adolescents shared with me over our correspondence, the value of what their band was doing lied in the protection that it gave them. They say: “It was enough to stop the physical confrontations instigated by the larger culture.” Through the music, and the

bands formed around the movement, they were able to offer each other and their fans a space of non-violence that they formed from their own new rules. They put their methods, thoughts, and ideals of self at the center of this space and identified everything else in relation to it. However, as it tends to be with disidentification, it was difficult for punks to escape the violence inflicted upon them, as violent attacks became synonymous with the Punk scene. It is unclear whether the prevalent performance of violence in the live Punk show and in Punk lyrics is an example of or a side effect of disidentification.

The act of disidentifying is also discussed as a painful process. Because of the removal of oneself from a space of violence and abjection, the person must reject the things around them and consider only their own survival and the survival of those in their community. Again, the Adolescents offer insight by saying: “In the larger culture of the suburbs, people from punk rock were socially isolated and ridiculed mercilessly until it was eventually co-opted.” Disidentification is a lonely process. Having to create your own community solely to avoid physical harm is a tragic event. This process is highlighted in punk music in the names that the bands gave themselves—The Germs, The Simpletons, The Zeros, Mutants, Wasted Youth, Verbal Abuse, Suicidal Tendencies, and other such disidentificatory monikers. The list goes on and on and on as an indicator of the conscious awareness of the process of disidentification (by some other name) that these communities endured.

Physically, the punk movement as history and the media present it to us was overwhelmingly pasty normal. It is manifested as a white, cis-gendered male, heterosexual subculture, with clear gender roles surrounding the role of the male and male aggression in the movement. However, in its ideologies and in the performance of

punk, musicians were able to overcome their pastiness and become comparable to the Davis' and Smiths of queer theater. L.A. Punk of the late 70s and 80s has a deep, rich history dotted with queer performers, performers of colors, and many intersections in between. There is nothing pasty about the harsh, messy, violent, colorful, anti-oppressive nature of the Punk movement. In fact, Punk is structurally reminiscent of civil rights movements made up of African-American, Chicano/Latino, Native, LGBT, and immigrant communities in the 1960s and 1970s, although punks were fighting for their own space separate from dominant culture instead of for integration into it. I wish to extract this muted history and bring the queer performer of color back into Punk.

My main influence is Penelope Spheeris' documentary work *The Decline of Western Civilization (Part 1)* (1981), which is a film about the Los Angeles punk music scene. She opens the film with a single testimony from a young fan about why he loves punk. Next, she splices together many different people who are reading the same film release form to their audience about the documentary taking place. Each musician, literally on a stage, *performs* the release by adding and taking away from the generic words on the paper. The readings are combined into a composite performance. Erich Nestler's musical vignettes inspire the ideas that I have for the audio-visuals. These simple productions show colorful bursts of abstract shapes that are rendered from the different properties of the song or notes that he plays on his guitar in Magix Music Maker 17. These elements will come together to form a world that is shaped by the Queer Person of Color Punk performer and is a departure from the limited definition of Punk as we know it.

I, as a queer, of color, musician, will monologue the aforementioned lost histories in my performance and play influential punk riffs by QPOC artists on my electric guitar to

produce my own color audio-visuals. My goal is for both of these influences to be reflected in my performance and use them to aid me in the resurrection of the many different queer and POC voices whose prominence in Punk has been erased by history.

2 Execution

My project is an audio-visual performance video that follows the emotional journey of a Queer woman of color named Punk. Punk is a mostly silent character who wakes up to find that they¹ have been written out of the history of Punk music. Once they have risen, Punk takes a disoriented walk to an old venue where they used to play. Finding the building unlocked, Punk enters and sees a guitar on stage. Approaching and touching the guitar, Punk is taken on an audio-visual mental journey through Punk performance history. At the end of this journey, Punk must make the decision to disappear into the night or to reclaim their place by stating (with action more so than with voice), as a great musician once said, “I’m not dead just yet.”²

It is important that I have free reign over my medium, as neither the subject matter nor the execution is traditional. In *Dejecta/Protecta*, Vaginal Davis experiments with free verse, spoken word, and monologue in her opening audio. She vocalizes her narrative without appearing on screen. Her disembodied voice gives life to on and off screen performers who are spread throughout the room. In constructing my monologues, I have been interviewing people who were active in the punk community in Los Angeles in the mid to late 1970s through the early 1980s through e-mail and Facebook. I will take their

¹ “They” is used as the preferred gender pronoun for the gender non-conforming character.

² Pink. “I’m Not Dead.” By Pink and Billy Mann. *I’m Not Dead*. La Face/Zomba, 2006. LP.

very short responses and turn them into creative pieces that resemble Davis' hybrid monologue, spoken word, free verse poetry in the way that their disembodied responses will be read off-screen by voices other than their own. These pieces will be read and performed by myself. I will use my own voice (both affected and unaffected by voice software) to create voice-over audio that will play as my character acts out their journey. I will pair this journey with visual testimonies, documentaries, and performances from the performers and videographers who influenced my project, such as Davis and Penelope Spheeris. Production on this audio component will begin on Nov 5th and commence on Nov 10th. I will take the time until then to write and finalize the scripts and written content. To transition between the monologues, I will use fast-moving photographs and still images (pre-recorded at live music events), visual representations of sound, such as those produced in Magix Music Maker 17, music, and other visual stimuli. This production will also begin on Nov 5th.

My production schedule for the visual component of this project expands through the end of October and the whole of November. Beginning on the evening of October 30th, I will be shooting scenes on Scripps Campus. I have secured Vita Nova 100, a space complete with room for an audience and a stage, as my primary location. The equipment that I will use will be a Canon T2i DSLR camera, an 18-55mm lens, a 50mm lens, and a tripod. I am choosing a simple set up that will likely reflect the low-tech approach that Spheeris adopted for her project. When interviewing band members, it appears that Spheeris either held the camera with a simple lens in hand or used a tripod. Most of these shots are from one angle and are arranged within a simple frame. In contrast in Spheeris,

my narrative will be shot from multiple angles that will be composited to tell a linear story.

As there is no sophisticated audio in these shots, I will use the camera mic to pick up environmental noise such as the slamming of doors and the character's footsteps and enhance them later. With the help of two of my friends, I will film from a number of angles during this preliminary shooting and determine which combinations I will use for the rest of the video.

I will continue to collect my video footage throughout Nov 9th, and audio (guitars, voice overs, monologues) until Nov. 10th. I will begin editing on Nov. 11th and continue until Nov. 23rd. My first draft of my project should be completed just before Thanksgiving Break. I will begin to finalize and polish my project following this break until the day before it is due.

In *Dejecta/Protecta*, Davis string together many different visual shots—an apathetic audience, honey-spewing performers, shots of the stage, projected words, lights, a foggy atmosphere and an almost green screen-like layering and transitioning technique. For the first three and a half minutes of the performance, the audio does not come from any of these sources, but from Davis herself, who is nowhere in frame. She recites facts to the audience surrounding her move to Germany, the mosque being built at Ground Zero, and a number of other seemingly unrelated pieces of data. This continues until the video shifts to include performer monologues. She uses these different types of audio to make an intentional, colluded commentary. This type of fluid, multi-use of sound will be a huge influence in the production of my own sound. I plan to experiment with voice,

sound, and noise in order to produce a cohesive narrative that is as successful as Davis' experimental piece.

Where Davis' audio voiceover is very clear, Spheeris' audio in *The Decline of Western Civilization* is grainy. Much like Punk itself, her sound is messy, interrupted, and full of feedback. I think that this type of sound, given her subject, was absolutely necessary. Performers like Darby Crash of The Germs rarely even sang into the mic. When this band first got together, they didn't even know how to play their instruments. Quality audio, which they absolutely did not have, was substituted for performance. Crash would smear peanut butter everywhere, break glasses over his head, and hurt himself on purpose, to the point of badly injuring himself on stage. Good audio was secondary, even tertiary to the important of *performance*. That is what made the show. That is what made clubs hesitant to book certain bands to play anymore. The performance was too live, too dangerous, too confrontational—too real. This violence was a reflection of the violent environment that these performers came out of (recall the violence of the suburbs that made disidentification necessary for many.) and it was scary. Club owners had an abject reaction to it and began refusing to book certain acts because of the environment that they created. I want to re-create this violent, messy, grainy, audio, and visuals, in my video. I, like Spheeris, think that it is a vital commentary on the Punk movement as a whole. Using live audio recorded at shows in the last month, my own grainy, sloppy electric guitar playing, and audio from *The Decline of Western Civilization* paired with visuals shot in low lighting, and live on the camera of a smart phone, I will tell Punk's story, as it is—unglamorous and compromised.

My methodology for this project is really to experiment with the relationship between audio and vision. I want to create a cohesive story that is told not from the mouth of the character, but as it is informed through other historical and commentative sources of audio information. It will be loud. It will be messy. And I have no idea what else.

3 Reflection

What I learned upon the completion of my project is that the journey sometimes becomes the project itself. In my video, opinion after opinion of what punk is or isn't plays over audio feedback, drums, environmental sounds, and other random, interruptive noises. My character Punk wakes from their slumber and is drawn to a building where they find a guitar on stage. The guitar is the source of all of the noise and interruption that woke them up. Punk listens for a moment to what is being communicated by this guitar, which holds the opinions of many "reputable sources" (audio from both documentaries that served as sources of inspiration for this project) as to what "Punk" is. Hearing enough, Punk picks up the guitar and smashes it, effectively silencing the voices and opinions, and leaves.

This action is a manifestation of the frustrations that I suffered from when I, a queer, gender non-conforming, person of color, went to pasty normals to get a definition of what Punk meant and where I fit into it. In this video, I personify the Punk music movement. In my action of smashing the guitar, Punk definitively says, "Don't try to define me. Shut the fuck up and leave me to rest."

I have to say that my project, to my frustration and delight, turned out to be nothing like I expected. Originally, I planned to re-conceptualize the punk movement as

an example of disidentification. Punk is often branded as being led by white, cis-gendered, physically and vocally aggressive males. I originally suggested that these individuals take the stage as a performance and that the Punk aesthetic is a form of drag that allows white musicians to escape their pasty white bodies. As I began to dig through the history of Punk, it was very difficult to see beyond these pale bodies. With every documentary that I watched, I saw pasty white men dressing up and acting out with the intention of being “different” and rejecting their mostly middle class backgrounds. As a black, Native American, working class, queer, gender non-conforming individual, I began to disidentify with a genre upon which I based many of my own personal political and social ideals. I feared that I had misidentified myself with this community and found myself attempting to force my ideals back into a mold that was suddenly the wrong shape.

In editing, I found it very difficult to achieve the aesthetic that I desired for my video. I struggled between making a video that was legible and one that was Punk. I wanted to reference Punk documentaries such as *The Decline of Western Civilization* (1981) and *Another State of Mind* (1984) in their messy, amateur composition, but I also wanted something legible, polished, and academic. At the same time, I was becoming disillusioned with my sources of inspiration. I was annoyed by Darby Crash’s voice, unimpressed with the music of Social Distortion and Youth Brigade, and rolled my eyes every time a young Punk was on camera talking about their disdain for “Preps” in polo shirts. In essence, I was fed up with trying to figure out what the story of Punk was, what role I played in it, and what I wanted to say about it.

By the time I finished my first rough edit, I was stuck with a story that was not being conveyed through the structure of my video. The message that I was trying to convey about the history and foundation of the Punk movement was lost altogether, and it showed in the aimless direction that my story took. So late in the semester, I was forced to think about what my project had become. What it was saying to me now was not what I had wanted it to say in the beginning. In the few days that I had left, I had to sit, reassess, and listen to what my journey through the execution of this project was saying about the project itself.

Each time that The Germs had a gig, they got more reckless and out of control. They did this until no one was willing to hire them anymore. Listening to the guidance and critiques that I received in my Work In Progress, which was to push the boundaries of the visual and audio aesthetics of my work, I stopped worrying about the clarity of my video. I stopped altering the audio tracks or ducking the sound when another person was talking. I added noise, dust, and scratches to my visuals. I added feedback to my audio. I roughed the border of my frame. I let go of all of the constraints of my project and really tried to “fuck it up”. As Professor Juhasz alluded to, this was very difficult to do. It’s not easy to know how far you can push the boundaries of your work and still execute it with integrity. But, I suppose that’s what Punk is all about. Pushing those boundaries until they break—acting as if there are no boundaries at all, and playing until no one wants you anymore.

It turns out that my project is a visual representation of my journey to create the project itself (quite meta, if I say so myself). My character, Punk, is a queer, gender non-conforming person of color. Punk is literally, me. I am Punk. I do not need documentaries

to tell me what Punk is, or to reassure me that I fit the mold. There is no mold. Punk doesn't fit in a box. There is no frame or border in which the movement is confined. Punk crosses many ethnic groups, genders, sexualities, and socioeconomic classes and rudely (and unapologetically) intrudes upon each and every other socially identifiable group. There is a delicate balance when it comes to being a part of a movement and trying to define it. In defining Punk, I believe that we effectively kill it. Years after Punk was declared dead, we still constantly attempt to define what it is or isn't, who is a poser and who is the real deal. What we all ultimately need to do is shut the fuck up and be who we are, no validation necessary.

Resources

Another State of Mind. Dir. Adam Small. Perf. Mike Ness and Dennis Danell. Time Bomb, 2004. DVD.

"*Conversation with The Adolescents*." Online interview. 20 Sept. 2013.

Jam Session Vignette Collection. Perf. Erich Nestler. *Vimeo*. Vimeo, LLC, Sept. 2011. Web. 1 Oct. 2013.

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis ;London: University of Minnesota, 2009. Print.

The Decline of Western Civilization. Dir. Penelope Spheeris. Perf. Black Flag, Germs, X, Alice Bag Band, Circle Jerks, Catholic Discipline, and Fear. Media Home Entertainment. 1981. VHS.