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Secrets at Final Hot Desert

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8-10 Greatorex St, E1 5NF



A Stage in November

Punk's not dead. The phrase is still a constant utterance as much as the question is of it ever having been alive. Attempts to interrogate the expression are quickly exhausted if not merely from the one who sputters this phrase and is met with a weary eye roll, then from the numerous accounts which chronicle the legacies of the genre. Yet, the immutable issue is, there has been at some point, a death. It is integral to make a speedy exit from the dissent into notions of the infallible 'genius artist'. The innumerable controversial incidents and stances – political, sexist, and racist – will otherwise apprehend this train of thought.¹ If even possible, a deeper understanding of the enigmatic dynamic between performer and audience is attempted.

In the consideration of what has been lost it is pivotal to re-examine the presumption that the audience implies spectatorship. Casually undertaken as a ritual of passivity, an assumed anonymity takes place for the (anti)hero to be watched. Yet, it is this *act* of voyeurism which in effect plays into the music's demise since it renders the art as merely spectacle. Much like the 19th century flâneur, perusing the city and considering art from a position of insidious voyeurism, many audiences now occupy the same remote and fetishistic stance. It is from this misconception that Ranciere identifies a 'fatal illusion of autonomy.' He writes, 'Trapped in the logic of dispossession and its concealment'², the compromise that lies in 'the separation of stage and auditorium is something to be transcended.'³[...] 'What must replace the mimetic mediation is the immediate ethical performance of a collective that knows no separation between performing actors and passive spectators.'⁴ In doing so, the limitations of what has been the modus operandi are dismantled, and a new potential is made available.

Such uninhibited space is not a particularly impossible task nor a speculative vision. In fact, a blurred boundary between performer and audience is not even exclusive to music making and performance. A

¹ Equally, categories of Punk including but not exclusive to the Cuban Los Frikis, reparations band Fuck U Pay Us, and such are to be excluded from this argument.

² Ranciere, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator*, translated by Gregory Elliot, 15. London & New York: VERSO, 2009.

³ Ibid, 15.

⁴ Ibid, 62.

tangible example of this is the impactfulness of public assembly at a grassroots level that especially shows bodies in alliance.⁵ Public assemblages, such as demonstrations, have reconfigured space to such an extent that for a moment a new world opens up. As much a defining characteristic as it is an essential function, political assembly and protest suddenly conjures the alternative— one with connectivity and contingency at its core. People march and dance in the streets where cars conventionally drive through. Someone climbs atop a lamp post in declaration. What is poignant and compellingly parallel in each setting is that both operate from a form that is ephemeral. This moment of critical mass⁶ performs a choreography particular to the site of the congregation. The audience is the body of the movement, and the public speakers are the chorus—narrating the action as in a Classical Greek tragedy. Crucially, at the protest, the spectator is absent. Then, at what point did the spectacle become insurmountable? As said by Hito Steyerl:

*We are not any longer in the period of the October, described by Eisenstein, when the cossacks decide to join the Russian proletariats and Internationalist Brotherhood during the Bolshevik revolution. Now, we are in the period of November [...] November is the time after October. A time when revolution seems to be over and peripheral struggles have become particular, localist, and almost impossible to communicate. In November, a new reactionary form of terror has taken over, which abruptly breaks with the tradition of October.*⁷

Is it too conspiratorial to suggest that ‘Punk’s not dead’ is no more than a response to Jim Morrison’s pronouncement, ‘Rock is dead’? In 1969, at the twilight of their career, the Doors played their most infamous show. From a fandom amassed by the tabloids chronicling the lead singer, the Miami venue overflowed with almost double the allotted capacity. The 12,000 spectators who managed to squeeze themselves into the hot and crumbling building grew impatient awaiting their object of marvel. By this time the freedom found in the anti-establishment counterculture of the 1960s had evaporated under the stage lights of *the rockstar*. And in this moment, in a crowded converted seaplane hangar, a paradox is revealed: exposure to an audience is as hardcore as the audience’s exploitative desires. ‘Even though the male rockstar had absorbed the female seductive techniques of narcissism and coquettishness, his powers ultimately rested on his phallic presence.’⁸ Morrison knew this; and in his intoxication of resentment and alcohol, staged his own ‘death’ of the icon by literally exposing himself to the audience.⁹ Again, this recounting is not to idolise the artist, but to delineate from the parabolic tragedy how this violent action is

⁵ Butler, Judith. “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street”. <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1011/butler/en/print>. 2011.

⁶ n. the size or number that something needs to reach before a particular change or development can happen

⁷ Steyerl, Hito, dir. *November*. 2004, 25 min.

⁸ Graham, Dan, dir. *Rock My Religion*. 1982-84, 55:27 min.

⁹ There is much debate as to whether Jim Morrison fully exposed his genitals from the shirt, which covered them and negligibly hid his gestures of masturbation. Morrison’s bandmates all deny that he fully exposed himself.

actually the counteraction. Proto Punk's Rock music had been interpolated into spectacle, namely through objectifying, consuming, and vilifying at a fickle distance. Morrison's attempt to destabilise this relationship has been collectively agreed to have been a *failure*; bringing about the end to not only the band, but the lead singer's life. However, by limiting commentary to a singular fixation on the artist it negates the issue at hand of the surreptitious spectator.

Divisive ploys have been and continue to address the gaze of the audience. What we might now distinguish from the Punk scene is the motivation of one whose confrontation is a response to the compromise versus one who indulges these gestures for shock factor. In equal urgency is the opportunity for the audience to experience sociality freely, on their own terms, and embody what music has the dramatic potential to do through public assembly.¹⁰ What is music? In being as bold as unequipped to answer such a question, it is a method of embodiment evoked through socially transformative moments in ways that Nuar Alsadir terms the 'True Self'. Alsadir describes this in *Animal Joy* as,

*A communication from the soul, the unconscious—any spontaneous gesture from the True Self—that provokes feeling in the body not only will amplify rational thought but, because it will inevitably be encoded by the specific body it passes through, will have the potential to expand our modes of experiencing and relation to one another.*¹¹

Returning to the contention, *Punk's not dead*, the ultimatum appears to lie between placebo and actual when subjected to spectatorship.

- Kaivalya Brewerton

¹⁰ Head banging included*

¹¹ Alsadir, Nuar. *Animal Joy: A Book of Laughter and Resuscitation*, 83. London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2022.