

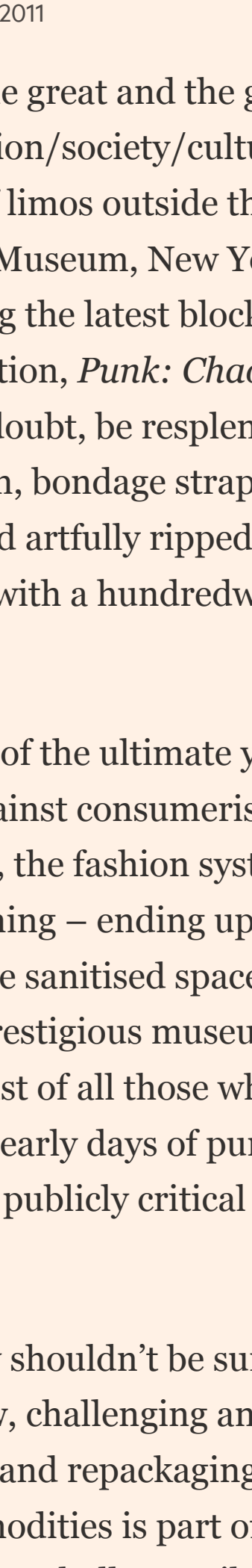
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'Punk: Chaos to couture'

A New York exhibition traces punk's journey to the catwalk



David Hayes MAY 3 2013



Chanel S/S 2011

On Monday the great and the good from the worlds of fashion/society/culture will draw up in a fleet of limos outside the Metropolitan Museum, New York, for a gala ball celebrating the latest blockbuster fashion exhibition, *Punk: Chaos to Couture*. They will, no doubt, be resplendent in designer tartan, bondage straps, Union Jack prints, zips and artfully ripped T-shirts – all held together with a hundredweight of safety pins.

The absurdity of the ultimate youthful cry of rebellion – against consumerism, the establishment, the fashion system, against almost everything – ending up as a glittering spectacle in the sanitised space of New York's most prestigious museum is not lost on anyone, least of all those who were present in the early days of punk and who are now being publicly critical about the event.

However, they shouldn't be surprised. Co-opting the new, challenging and extraordinary and repackaging them as saleable commodities is part of the essence of fashion. From skulls to spikes, the totems of the underground have been appropriated by the mainstream and rendered decorative since the industry began. The Met's new show just underscores that reality.

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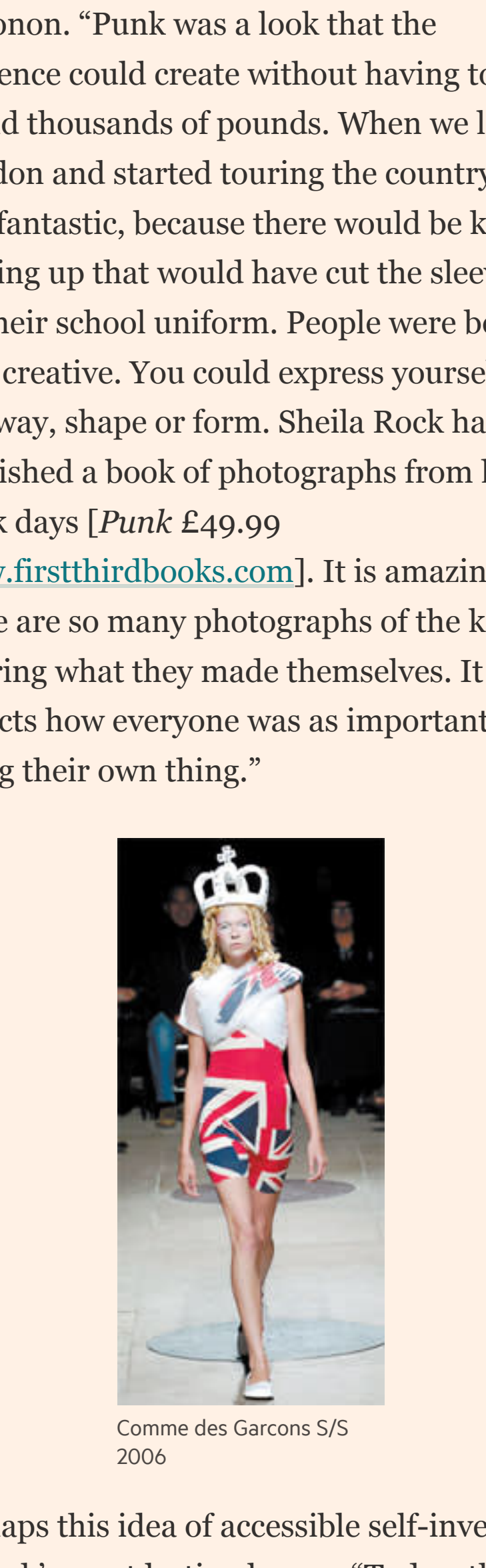
Paul Simonon, former bass guitarist of the Clash and erstwhile punk pin-up, says it's good that the show's happening but he is not planning to attend. "If I went, I might see too many things that are wrong," he says. "They might have missed the point, the heart of it. And that would annoy me. And I'd be a bit upset having gone all that way just to get wound-up."



The Clash in 1976

He is not alone. John Lydon, better known as Johnny Rotten, lead singer of the Sex Pistols, writes as much in a foreword to the glossy coffee-table book that accompanies the exhibition. "I've become used to people distorting the history and details to suit their own egos, when I've had a life's experience of it. At heart, punk was a street culture. It came from kids on the street doing it yourself [*sic*]. The trouble is that punk got co-opted, and distorted by the media. People find it hard to get away from the clichés, it became a stereotype."

In some ways the shiny and superficial is the point, according to Andrew Bolton, the exhibition's curator. "This is actually the second exhibition that the Costume Institute has presented on punk," he says. "The first was *Anglomania: Tradition and Transgression in British Fashion*, in 2006. This serves as a sequel, but rather than looking at punk as an attitude, it looks at punk as an aesthetic. No other countercultural movement has had a greater or more enduring influence on high fashion."



Sid Vicious of the Sex Pistols photographed in a McLaren and Westwood T-shirt in 1977

The exhibition traces those influences – and their high-fashion spawn – with forensic precision; from the way Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood's early parachute shirts and Anarchy Flag T-shirts, were reinvented in John Galliano's A/W 2006 Dior haute couture collection and Comme des Garçons' S/S 2006 collection. It draws a genealogical tree from a ripped and torn T-shirt on the Sex Pistols' Sid Vicious to an exquisitely tattered suit by Karl Lagerfeld (S/S 2011) for Chanel. It connects the way PVC and safety pins have been reworked by everyone from Zandra Rhodes (1977) to Jeremy Scott (S/S 2011) and Gianni Versace (the famous safety pin dress worn by Elizabeth Hurley in 1994).

"The punk ethos of do-it-yourself might seem at odds with the couture ethos of made-to-measure," says Bolton. "But, in fact, they are both defined by the same impulses of originality and individuality. If anything, the punk ethos of do-it-yourself results in fashions that exist almost beyond couture in their singularity."

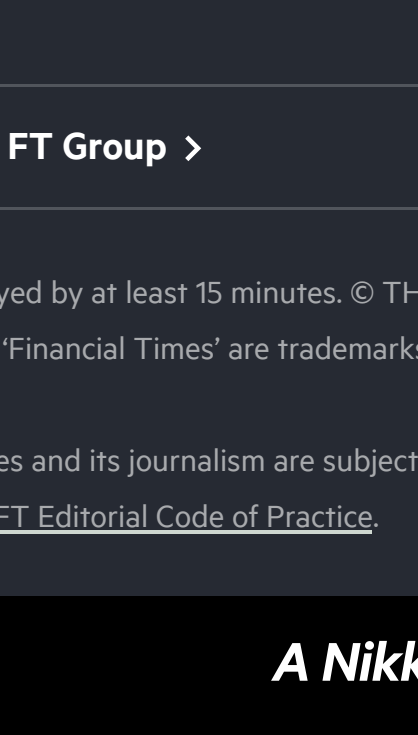


Jeremy Scott S/S 2011

Beyond the museum, punk images such as the skull and crossbones motif have progressed from emblem of countercultural anarchy on ripped T-shirts, to cartoonish rock statement sported by the Osbornes on MTV, to a ubiquitous luxury staple stamped on silk chiffon scarves selling for £350 a piece by Alexander McQueen.

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"All these people have done is taken the cream off the top," says the Clash's Simonon. "Punk was a look that the audience could create without having to spend thousands of pounds. When we left London and started touring the country it was fantastic, because there would be kids turning up that would have cut the sleeves off their school uniform. People were being very creative. You could express yourself in any way, shape or form. Sheila Rock has just published a book of photographs from her punk days [*Punk* £49.99 www.firstthirdbooks.com]. It is amazing as there are so many photographs of the kids wearing what they made themselves. It reflects how everyone was as important, doing their own thing."



Comme des Garçons S/S 2006

Perhaps this idea of accessible self-invention is punk's most lasting legacy. "Today, the punk ethos of do-it-yourself is not simply restricted to the arena of fashion, it permeates every aspect of our lives," says Bolton. Technological advances, especially the web, are the new facilitators. The grassroots expression is evident in the US's Maker Movement – a subculture of hobbyists that are applying the DIY approach to technologies.

Which is where fashion takes us through the looking glass again, of course, for many of the attendees at the Met exhibition's swishy opening gala will not be doing it (or dressing it) themselves: an army of publicists, stylists, designers and editors will be calling the shots on the red carpet. A final irony, or yet another mind-bending twist in punk's anarchic tale? You decide.

'Punk: Chaos to Couture' runs until August 14, www.metmuseum.org

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