

Punk sans punk

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“Punk: Chaos to Couture

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

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The exhibition *PUNK: Chaos to Couture* presents itself as an exploration of the influence of punk on haute couture. It starts with the recreation of two spaces: the bathrooms of the mythical New York club CBGB and the *Seditionaries* shop in London’s King’s Road. The music is noisy, as in a bar or in a flashy clothes shop.

The following rooms, which bear the name of punk’s appeal to ‘do it yourself’, are inhabited by white mannequins wearing outfits of the highest haute couture. Andrew Bolton, the exhibition curator, claims to take punk as an *aesthetics* and not as an *attitude*. Nonetheless, and in spite of a total profusion of golden safety pins and satin cloths faking rubbish bags, on many occasions the show loses the reference to punk, which sometimes disappears even from its superficial version as a mere visual vocabulary.

What is certain is the scarcity of ‘historical’ outfits or images from the seventies: of the 95 items, about 60 date from later than 2006. This means that the costumes of Comme de Garçons, Junya Watanabe, Givenchy, and Karl Lagerfeld are offered for sale within the circuit of luxury stores across New York. This is catwalk punk, and at times it seems simply an exercise of aesthetic legitimization to help the luxury goods business.

Various authors have traced the influence of the historical avant-garde movements – particularly situationism – on the origins of punk. With its intention of scandalizing and provoking the middle class, punk ties in with the avant-garde vein that seeks to *épater le bourgeois* and to move away from middle-class ambitions, which it deems mediocre. Linking punk and *haute couture*, the exhibition may want to introduce the eccentricities of luxury design within a genealogy of cultural response. If we accept this narrative, the elitism of high fashion would be related to the ‘autonomy’ and the ‘freedom’ that Western society has reserved for the sphere of art.

After a wave of deserved criticism from different media, the exhibition seems to have left no trace at all.

Counterculture projects itself onto high culture, onto low culture, and also onto dissidence. In this sense, we should recall today certain slogans and the important lessons we can draw from them. Street punks had lost hope: NO FUTURE, let’s live the present. The punks had lost respect: NO HEROES, no one has the right to rule over us. And punks had recovered agency: DO IT YOURSELF. It is in our hands to do whatever we want to do; no one else will do for us. Moving in directions that converge neither with the Metropolitan nor with the New York headquarters of Chanel, it is clear that today’s social movements are in a certain sense the heirs

of the punk spirit. Proof of this can be seen in the way that the Spanish group JUVENTUD SIN FUTURO (Youth with no Future) has transformed the cry of rage into a political demand, with which to take the streets.

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