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We Wanna Be Sedated: Punk Under Glass at the New Museum

By Tom Hawking on Dec 14, 2012 12:30pm



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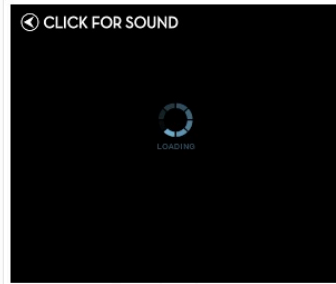
I've generally been suspicious of the nostalgia industry that's grown up around the 1970s New York punk scene — it's when people starts to celebrate their achievements rather than trying to surpass them that art grows stale and reactionary. Still, I went along with an open mind to last night's [panel discussion](#) at the New Museum about the visual art scene that evolved during the '70s in parallel to the CBGB-centric music scene. The discussion was part of the exhibition [Come Closer: Art Around the Bowery 1969-89](#), which is on through the end of December, and it featured *Punk* founder John Holmstrom, Bush Tetras' Pat Place, photographer Marcia Resnick, and artist and Ramones associate Arturo Vega, all discussing their work and generally reminiscing about how great New York City used to be.

The mere fact that punk is discussed in earnest environments with reserved seating and surly ushers who relegate late arrivals to the back of the room says a lot about where the movement is at these days — a fact that was, in fairness, acknowledged by the participants, with Holmstrom, in particular, appearing rather amused by the fact he'd been asked to sit and talk about the cartoons he'd drawn of Lou Reed and Iggy Pop back in the 1970s. Hearing the artists illuminating their work with contextual detail and anecdotes was interesting enough, even though there was ultimately a sense that you perhaps had to be there at the time to fully appreciate why, say, photos of various Bowery senesters carried such lasting historical significance.

But these events also breed a certain sort of cultural conservatism, inevitably devolving into discussions about how awesome things used to be and how the city just isn't the same anymore and how kids these days don't have anything like punk and etc. This sort of thing makes me angry — there are still and will always be people pushing the creative envelope, and to be honest it takes a rather depressingly blinkered viewpoint to proclaim the end of culture because you've ceased to understand it, when you've become the rebelled against rather than the rebellious.

Of course, not all of the No Wave scene has succumbed to this sort of self-regarding torpor — Swans just made arguably the best record of 2012, John Zorn's venue The Stone is home to some of the most interesting shows NYC has to offer, and Sonic Youth were as great as ever before the unfortunate Thurston/Kim debacle put paid to the whole thing. But still, this evening left something of a sour taste in my mouth — not because someone's taken the time and care to put together a fascinating exhibition of historical artifacts, of which curator Ethan Swan has done a fine job here, but because it seemed all too indicative of where punk is at these days: preserved under glass at fancy museums, rearticulated back into the mainstream, a historical phenomenon to be dissected and analyzed and reminisced about, which seems a long way from the ideals of joyous and irreverent DIY self-expression we're told it used to embody.

But, look, whatever your view on the entire culture of nostalgia, the paraphernalia on show at the exhibition does make for interesting viewing. Click through to check out a selection of the exhibits, and let us know what you make of it all in the comments.



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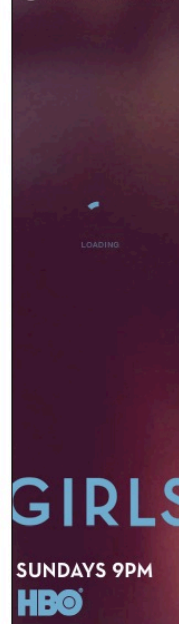
RICHARD RODGERS THEATRE

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Colette (Justine), installation and performance promoting Justine's LP Beautiful Dreamer in the window of Record City, 1980.



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