

'Mummy ... what is a Sex Pistol?': SEX, sex and British punk in the 1970s

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Worley, M. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3049-8714>
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'Mummy ... what is a Sex Pistol?': SEX, sex and British punk in the 1970s**Matthew Worley**

In June 1976, a magazine interview with Vivienne Westwood outlined her views on the clothes shop she ran with Malcolm McLaren. '[Our] message is simple. We want you to live out your wildest [...] fantasies to the hilt.' Their aim, she said, was to 'convert, educate and liberate'. 'We are really making a *political statement* with our shop by attempting to attack the system.'¹

The shop, of course, was called SEX, located on the King's Road in London and soon-to-be forever associated with the gestation of British punk. Through it emerged the Sex Pistols, already beginning to court controversy in the music press at the time of Westwood's interview. In and around their wake came a 'new wave' of bands eager and able to reimagine popular music into the 1980s.² The clothes sold in SEX, meanwhile, would – in a matter of months – help redesign the cultural fabric. As the residual influence of early 1970s style began to give way to the bricolage of punk, so flares became straight and hair got cropped.³ Black returned and new textures found an outlet; say goodbye to shades of brown and heavy denim.

'Punk', however, was not mentioned in the feature. Neither the word nor the associated musical style was fully formulated by the spring of 1976. In fact, the interview was conducted by Len Richmond for *Forum*, a top-shelf magazine that explored the sociological outreaches of all things erotic. Westwood and SEX were featured amid articles on women with younger lovers and a survey on oral sex. The focus was on the rubberwear items that lined the walls and the customers who frequented the shop. Only in the accompanying

pictures, wherein Westwood bared her backside alongside Jordan (Pamela Rooke), Chrissie Hynde (later of The Pretenders), Danielle Lewis, Alan Jones and Sex Pistols' guitarist Steve Jones, was there glimpse of a nascent youth culture and the band that helped define it.

Quite evidently, sexual subversion was to the fore in the earliest moments of punk's becoming: 'the system' was to be attacked, in part, by unleashing (teenage) desire. As it was, the *sturm und drang* that consumed the Sex Pistols through 1976–77 all but buried this component of pre-punk provocation. The incendiary connotations of 'Anarchy in the UK' and 'God Save the Queen' lent punk and the Pistols a confrontational edge that appeared more seditious than sensual. It was the group's anti-social behaviour rather than their sexual predilections that prompted newspaper headlines from late 1976.⁴ True, the stylistic innovations of what became punk are oft celebrated and recognised as integral to the shock effect generated in 1976–77. The subsequent career of Westwood as a doyen of haute couture has been accompanied by countless exhibitions of punk clothing and design.⁵ But watch a documentary – or flick-through a magazine feature – on punk and stock images of derelict Britain rarely dwell on the relationship between disaffected youths and a T-shirt flashing a penis. In such a way, punk's use of sex to critique and assault the socio-moral complacencies of 1970s Britain diluted over time. 'We want to demystify sex', Westwood insisted in *Forum*, 'to free people of their sexual inhibitions. "Out of the bedroom and into the streets!", now that really would be revolutionary.'⁶

This chapter aims to locate the 'sex' in the Sex Pistols and explore how sexual subversion was key to punk's cultural intervention – at least in the beginning. To date, relatively few people have looked too hard in this direction. Paul Gorman's exhaustive biography of McLaren mined the history of SEX in ways deeper than any previous account of punk's formation, while James Anderson has applied a theoretical lens to 'punk and porn'

more generally.⁷ Both Jon Savage and John Scanlon have noted the influence of Wilhelm Reich on SEX's philosophy, while my own work has connected punk to the disembodied howls of the Marquis de Sade.⁸ David Wilkinson, too, has critically dissected McLaren and Westwood's attitude to sex in the 1970s, noting in the process how Queer theorists have celebrated punk displays of sexual 'transgression'.⁹ Typically, however, the transformation of fetishwear into fashionwear is observed rather than considered. Most brazenly, Toby Mott's 2016 *Showboat* project revelled in the salacious ephemera generated through punk, collating porn shoots and cataloguing the explicit material that decorated gig flyers and record sleeves through punk and American no wave, riot grrrl and queercore into the 2000s.¹⁰

The objective here is to recover and reassert the sexual dimension of punk's cultural assault. After all, when McLaren spoke to the short-lived music paper *Street Life* around the same time as Westwood's *Forum* interview, he envisaged SEX's ideal customer to be a teenage girl from the suburbs buying a rubber miniskirt at the weekend to wear to work on Monday.¹¹ And for a moment, as Jordan travelled to the King's Road from Seaford in a 'black rubber skirt and black silk stockings' that unsettled and maybe also excited her fellow commuters, his desire all but became a reality.¹²

SEX: Craft must have clothes but truth loves to go naked

The backstory to SEX has been told many times.¹³ McLaren – having worked his way through various London art schools – took up space in 430 King's Road in late 1971. With his friend Patrick Casey he named the shop Let it Rock, rubbing initially against the countercultural grain to reassemble the 1950s in the form of teddy boy threads and early rock 'n' roll records. Casey soon drifted from the scene and Westwood got more involved, modifying clothing and reviving dead-stock ready for sale.¹⁴ Inside the shop, a mocked-up front room was strewn

with 1950s ephemera, including early 'cheesecake' porn magazines such as *Spick*, *Span* and *QT* – the latter quite possibly informing the name 'Kutie Jones and his Sex Pistols' that later featured on a T-shirt. Rocksploitation film posters – *Vive le Rock!* – and pictures of rock 'n' rollers covered the walls at the front-of-shop, where drape jackets and creepers were displayed next to rockabilly shirts and Slim Jim ties.

McLaren evidently sensed a cultural shift. Throughout 1972, he and Westwood helped service a rock 'n' roll revival that peaked with an all-day festival at Wembley Stadium in August and thereafter fed into films such as *That'll Be the Day* (1973), for which Let it Rock provided costumes. Extending the subcultural theme, rocker and biker-style leathers were added to the stock over 1973 as Let it Rock transformed into *Too Fast To Live Too Young To Die*. Therein, the spirit of *The Wild One* (1953) mixed with Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1963) in search of new expression. T-shirts and leather skirts were studded or decorated with evocative terms: 'Dominator', 'Venus', 'Perv'. Zips were fitted and clothes distressed; nudie pics were added to ties and shirts. By détournant the past to evoke the present, McLaren and Westwood began to innovate rather than excavate. In so doing, the sexual allure of youth subcultural style came more to the fore.

Such synergy found fruition with the opening of SEX in the early autumn of 1974. Inside, black leather and rubber accoutrements pointed towards darker, carnal sensibilities. Having travelled to New York in 1973, McLaren found himself awakened to the underground clubs frequented by the New York Dolls and the Warhol crowd, both of whom documented the city's sexual subterranea.¹⁵ Not too long after his return, the shop was gradually transformed into a psychosexual playpen. Fetish garments and rubber clothing hung from gymnasium wall-bars alongside remnants of rock 'n' roll stock and a jukebox playing tunes predating the hippie 1960s. The *Forum* feature wrote of 'high-heeled boots, rubber panties,

leather bras, leather wrist and ankle restraints [...] rubber mini-skirts (£12) [...] and six different styles of rubber masks and hoods (£20–£50)', one of which was inflatable to allow 'total pressure on the face'.¹⁶ Quotes from pornographic novellas were applied to clothes and spray-painted on the wall next to surrealist and situationist slogans: 'modernity killed every night'; 'be reasonable, demand the impossible'. Breaking up the shop, latex curtains demarcated dressing rooms that complemented the racks of rubber mackintoshes and exotic shoes. A skin-coloured 'French-Letter Suit' was presented as an 'evening dress'.¹⁷ Out front, black-curtained door panels were cast in the shadow of three large pink florescent letters spelling S-E-X. Graffitied underneath, Thomas Fuller's motto declared that 'craft must have clothes, but truth loves to go naked'.

As fetish and fashion began to coalesce, so the clothes and accoutrements stocked by SEX transformed style into revolt and revolt into style. On the one hand this meant transferring the private to the public: rubber bodices or stockings worn in the street; studded collars and cock-rings becoming jewellery. 'I dress like this all the time', Jordan said in late 1975 whilst wearing only a black rubber bra and matching stockings, 'even for Sunday dinner'.¹⁸ On the other, it inspired a range of designs intended to both incite and embolden. The idea, McLaren argued, was that 'wearing these clothes will affect your social life'.¹⁹ By crossing over with rock 'n' roll and aligning their designs to more cerebral cultural rebellion, McLaren and Westwood directed their appeal towards young people looking for a 'movement that's hard and tough and in the open'.²⁰ No longer content to *imply* the correlation between youth culture and sex, McLaren and Westwood made the connection explicit.

They did this in various ways. First by the shop itself, which promised the possibility of sexual discovery whilst also making it feel tantalisingly forbidden behind the darkened interior. Once through the door, new worlds – and experiences – might be discovered, be it on the clothes racks or

by way of the jukebox and pictures from New York pinned to the walls. As the 1950s front room in Let it Rock suggested, 430 King's Road was as much an installation as a shop, a creative forum designed to stimulate and serve as a meeting place (to 'convert, educate and liberate'). Jordan described it as a 'social hub' and an 'information bureau', a space both enlightening and thrillingly intimidating.²¹

Second, SEX designs aestheticised fetishism and outré sexualities, extending their appeal from practitioners to fellow-travellers alive to illicit adventure. Materials were fastidiously sourced, initially through PO Box addresses found at the back of Sunday broadsheets via which McLaren would meet contacts who opened 'their doors and in the back rooms they were making rubber masks'.²² A network was uncovered, with cottage industries across the UK providing clothes for fetishists. John Sutcliffe, whose *AtomAge* magazine documented the scene, supplied the more expensive rubberwear for SEX. Nearer to King's Road, the London Leatherman delivered bespoke leatherwear. Specialist shoemakers were sought to make the stilettos and boots suited to the fetishist. In the meantime, further visits to the US by McLaren and others gathered materials for T-Shirt designs and accessories.²³ In all cases, attention to detail was paramount.

Image-wise, fetishwear was complemented by customised clothing that bound sexuality to youth subculture. Distressed T-shirts served this best, often screen-printed by future Clash manager Bernard Rhodes and devised to communicate SEX's socio-cultural challenge. So, for example, three pornographic quotes were pulled from Alexander Trocchi, an erstwhile situationist and perennial junkie whose writing for Maurice Girodias' Olympia Press perfectly bridged the sensual and subversive. One – 'I groaned with pain as he eased the pressure in removing the thing which had split me [...]' – came from *Helen and Desire* (1954); two more – 'softly she undulated her hips to smear her juices over his face [...]' and 'she felt the seed stir at the pit of her belly in response to the

strong tongue movements [...] – came from *School for Sin/School for Wives* (1955; 1967). A pair of breasts were also transposed to a T-shirt, the idea taken from a Rhode Island art school project McLaren found by chance on a trip to New Orleans.²⁴ Though an ostensibly simple design, the T-shirt's meaning and effect shifted depending on who was wearing it: male, female, younger, older.

Far more controversial were designs that provoked social prejudice as well as moral convention. So, for example, racial smears and fears were goaded by the naked image of Maurice Spencer, an Afro-American footballer with his penis on full display. Latent homophobia was triggered by a Jim French illustration of two half-naked cowboys brought back from New York by McLaren in 1975. With their penises almost touching, one cowboy straightens the other's neckerchief as they bemoan the 'played 'aht' scene 'gettin' to[o] straight'. Extreme sexual acts – orgies and fisting – were later displayed through graphic illustration, though the 'smoking boy' shirt must now count among the most contentious of SEX's designs.²⁵ Taken from a magazine called *Boys Express* and envisaged to embody the idea of the Sex Pistols as 'sexy young assassins'²⁶, the shirt featured a naked pre-pubescent boy looking nonchalantly beyond the viewer with hand on hip and a cigarette.

Third, SEX's provocation was embodied by those who wore the clothes. In the shop, Jordan all but became the first Sex Pistol, bringing her own sense of style to bear on fetishwear worn to a rock 'n' roll soundtrack. Pictures from the time show her with a Ricci Burns beehive haircut, either modelling SEX's rubber lingerie or standing high-heeled in-and-outside the shop in a mix of mohair, leather, SEX shirts and see-through crinoline skirts. Her poise was always assertive and engaged, with bold make-up and a demeanour *Gallery International* magazine described as signalling 'sado sex for the seventies'.²⁷ Westwood, too, might be interviewed in a leather jerkin with zips and wrist-straps that could be bound to a dog collar. '[Not] the sight you expect to see in a noonday wine bar', one interviewer noted, 'and that, precisely, is [the] point'.²⁸ Indeed, public display brought reaction. Beyond Jordan causing awkward moments on her commute into London, Alan Jones was picked up

by police in Piccadilly for wearing the semi-naked cowboys T-Shirt. Jones, a regular customer and briefly an assistant at SEX, landed a charge of showing an obscene print in a public place recently made notorious as a rent boy hangout by Yorkshire TV's *Johnny Go Home* documentary.²⁹ SEX was duly raided the following day (29 July 1975), leading both to Jones and the shop receiving fines and effectively confirming to McLaren and Westwood that sex provided a ready means to unsettle the puritan core of English society.³⁰

As for SEX's wider clientele, the odd teddy boy and ageing rock star now rubbed shoulders with fetishists and a growing coterie of imaginative teenagers looking for clothes to negate the staid styles of the mid-1970s. The fetishists, among whom were reputedly TV personalities and establishment grandees, shopped for their private pleasure, ordering specialist items before reconvening in their suburban homes to play out fantasies both elaborate and rarefied.³¹ The teenagers coalesced around the Sex Pistols to form the kernel of punk's expanding milieu. In fact, John Samson's film *Dressing for Pleasure* (1977) captured this unexpected relationship for posterity, as footage of the older 'rubber duck club' segues into the proto-punk SEX habitué.

The most well-known of the fledgling punks were the so-called 'Bromley Contingent', christened by the writer and activist Caroline Coon in an early feature for *Melody Maker*.³² Among them was Siouxsie Sioux (Susan Ballion), whose penchant for Weimar chic took on dominatrix overtones when fused with SEX accoutrements. Her friends, a mix of genders and sexualities, adopted names that referred to Christopher Isherwood's tales of 1930s decadence (Bertie 'Berlin' Marshall) and Sacher-Masoch's erotic novel *Venus in Furs* (1870) via the Velvet Underground (Steve Severin). In the process, they – and the wider SEX milieu – cultivated bohemian sensibilities that intimated (and romanticised) deviant experience. Nowadays, a list of SEX's clientele reads as a who's who of punk and punk-related culture, be it the Pistols themselves or the likes of Hynde, Peter Christopherson (Throbbing Gristle), Soo Catwoman, Steve Strange, Poly Styrene, Judy Nylon, Marco

Pirroni, Adam Ant, Viv Albertine (The Slits), Boy George, Pauline Murray (Penetration) *et al.*, many of whom came from the suburbs and further reaches of the UK, travelling to London before then proselytising the shop's possibilities on their return home.

SEX, then, opened the door to secret worlds. It promised transformation and transgression – but also demanded a commitment. A manifesto conceived by Rhodes and delivered with McLaren and Westwood set out the shop's stall on a 1974 T-Shirt: 'You're gonna wake up one morning and know what side of the bed you've been lying on'. Here, sexual fetishists were listed next to radicals, rock 'n' rollers and revolutionaries. More importantly, SEX and its affiliates were set against socialites, sell-outs and the society of the spectacle. A weapon in the struggle, SEX's Sex Pistols were primed to shoot from the hip.

SEX and (pre-)punk Britain: Saw you in a mag, kissing a man ...

Paul Gorman has suggested, quite plausibly, that Nik Cohn's 1971 book *Today There Are No Gentleman* planted seeds for McLaren. Published just before Let it Rock opened, Cohn's book proposed that rock 'n' roll's sexual charge was aroused through shifts in youth cultural style.³³ For the teddy boy, he wrote, 'their clothes said just three things: *I am different; I am tough; I fuck*'.³⁴ In effect, we can see the transition from Let it Rock to SEX – from teddy boy revival to punk – as an attempt to work through Cohn's equation.

Of course, other influences also fed McLaren's fertile imagination. His art school training introduced him to radical ideas that reached through French situationists and conceptual art to the more extreme outposts of the counterculture. Obsessions, be they early rock 'n' roll or hidden histories found along London's byways and alleyways, led him toward sites of revolt and sounds of disorder. There he shared his manias with a rolling cast of acquaintances and collaborators, inciting actions that consistently repositioned the fixations

of late twentieth century culture. On visiting McLaren and Westwood's South London flat in 1977, the *Rolling Stone* writer Charles Young noted bookshelves containing 'Orwell, Dickens, de Sade and Wilhelm Reich's *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*', a potent mix that all but signposted punk's dystopian-psychosexual-delinquent impulse.³⁵

Regarding SEX and sex, the early interviews undertaken by McLaren and Westwood in 1975–76 offer glimpse of ideas forming to help instigate cultural change. Not surprisingly, given SEX's focus on fetishism, these were often found in pornographic publications – though typically ones marketed as 'sex education' magazines (*Curious*) or journals of 'human relations' (*Forum*). Already, clothes sourced from 430 King's Road featured in *Club International* over 1973–75. These, more often than not, decorated fashion shoots and featurettes photographed by David Parkinson, with leather macs or stilettoed shoes providing the suitably seductive styling.³⁶ In 1975, *Curious* captured Jordan modelling clothes from the shop alongside more explicit shots of Karen Cook (aka Susan Shaw aka Mona Solomon) in a rubber mask and an array of SEX T-shirts.³⁷ *Parade*, in 1976, also featured a model wearing just the Trocchi 'groaned with pain ...' shirt, while the aforementioned *Forum* piece concentrated only on those in the shop on the day.³⁸ In each case, the images appeared incongruous next to more clichéd pornographic spreads. Interviews, however, allowed McLaren and Westwood to expound their ideas and present SEX as something more than a sleazy corner of Soho transported to Chelsea.

Key themes emerged. The alignment of youth subculture and sexual subculture was immediately apparent. 'I'm excited by cults', McLaren told *Curious* in 1975, 'that's why I opened Let it Rock. And now, the cults are the sex people. The leather people, rubber freaks, transvestites, shoe fetishists'.³⁹ 'I am primarily concerned', he continued later in the year, with 'young people, eighteen, nineteen years of age, who need to find expression in what

they're doing'.⁴⁰ To this end, what the journalist David May described as a 'bizarre combination of sex and politics' was devised, fusing the sexually-charged threat of the teddy boy with the socially-deviant practice of the fetishist.⁴¹ Interestingly, however, the 'bulk of the customers' were recognised to include 'young working-class and middle-class girls', preempting Jordan's claim that the overt sexuality of SEX provided a challenge both to gender norms and social expectations. 'I'm completely opposed to the chic look', she told *Honey* magazine in 1976. 'I think it's unattractive. It takes any sexiness away from the body and to bring sexiness back is my aim [...] I think you need a really full body to wear this, so I never diet [...]'.⁴² It was young women, far more than men, who most overtly radicalised – and problematised – the dynamics of sexuality through punk: 'I looked powerful', Jordan said. 'I know I looked very intimidating'.⁴³

Not coincidentally, the *politics* of sexual expression were highlighted in the interviews. That is: 'to bring onto the outside of the body some of the changes which the increasing sexual liberation of the last ten years have wrought inside the head'.⁴⁴ As this suggests, the clothes served as a commentary on the possibilities and limitations of 'sexual revolution', pushing the boundaries and testing the limits. '[We] began to see the pertinence of it', Westwood said. 'The fact is that if you really do want to find out how much freedom you have in this British society at the moment, the best way is just to make an overt sexual statement and you'll have all the hounds of hell on your back'.⁴⁵ Accordingly, SEX's designs confronted conformity by celebrating 'deviance': they demanded a reaction. But they also ventured into violent extremes, be it Valerie Solanas' SCUM (Society for Cutting Up Men) Manifesto or, even more disturbingly, the 'Cambridge Rapist' T-Shirt that McLaren struggled to justify to *Gallery International*.

Solanas had shot Andy Warhol in 1968, responding to a perceived slight but also raging against 'degenerate' men whose 'ego consists of cock'. Men were even 'unfit for stud service', Solanas insisted, being little more than 'walking dildo[s]' for whom sex was akin to 'a good plumbing job'. The solution: to 'kill all men who are not in the Men's Auxiliary of SCUM [...] working diligently to eliminate themselves'.⁴⁶

The Cambridge Rapist was the name given by the press to Peter Cook. Cook committed a series of rapes and sexual assaults over the course of 1974–75, from which the media picked up on his wearing a leather hood with the word 'rapist' etched across it. The possibility that Cook was a customer at SEX led to a visit by police. In response, McLaren designed a shirt depicting Cook's mask set next to a smaller insert repeating rumours of The Beatles' manager Brian Epstein's death in 1967 occurring as a result of sadomasochism. The shirt was titled 'It's Been a Hard Day's Night'. Accused of being exploitative, McLaren noted the T-shirt's commentary on the media's morally duplicitous fascination with sexual violence. But he also suggested Cook was as much a symptom as a perpetrator of sexual repression, a 'symbol of what is happening to everybody in this country'.⁴⁷

Such dubious reasoning was in keeping with McLaren's moral detachment. For David Wilkinson, both McLaren and Westwood's desire to shock was ultimately contained within the same 'conservative orthodoxies' they sought to inflame. '[Rather] than consciously alternative or oppositional values, the designs deliberately inhabited dominant understandings of unsanctioned sexuality as perverse', Wilkinson argued.⁴⁸ Same-sex desire or inter-racial relationships were thereby rendered as 'deviant' alongside rape and a variety of fetishisms, suggesting provocation – not liberation – was always really the point. Indeed, the word 'punk' has, of course, an etymology that traces back to prostitution, evolving through time to accrue an array of (deviant) variations.⁴⁹ As a

term used to identify a delinquent or a youth selling or passed around for sex, 1970s 'punk' inverted socio-sexual mores to turn the world upside down.

More resonant, perhaps, and crucial to later claims of punk's socio-political pertinence, was McLaren's suggestion that SEX captured a 1970s *mood*. 'There are always moods', he argued in 1975. '[But] it takes someone to articulate them. If it happens to be me, then it's me'.⁵⁰ Along with Westwood, he pondered the appeals of restriction and a growing fascination with sadomasochism that others, including the US writer Susan Sontag, recognised to be permeating the decade.⁵¹ This, after all, was a period in which film-makers, photographers, artists and writers were aestheticising and theorising about sexual fetishism, with 'Nazi-chic' and 'terrorist chic' being coined as terms to describe films such as *The Night Porter* (1974) or the *Vogue* fashion-shoots of Helmut Newton.⁵² The bondage suit, modelled first by Johnny Rotten on the Sex Pistols' trip to Paris in September 1976, became the epitome of McLaren and Westwood's ruminations, at once alluding to fetishism but also signalling the social restrictions they implied shaped sexual convention.⁵³

The context, of course, was a period of economic and political instability combined with the ongoing advance of consumerism, liberalism and media spectacle. In Britain, industrial tensions and social antagonisms flared as faultlines in the post-war 'consensus' began to widen. A lexicon of 'crisis' and 'decline' determined at least one version of 1970s 'reality', resonating in a country scarred by the on-going process of deindustrialisation.⁵⁴ The Second World War, not to mention the end of empire, cast shadows that masked deeper existential pains. Beneath the superficial optimism of the 'swinging sixties', moral conservatism seethed and feminist critiques pushed back against the liberatory claims made for the 'permissive society'. 'People all want to be guilty', McLaren insisted, 'guilty of their own sexual desires'.⁵⁵ By so doing, he tapped into the same masochistic mode that Jon Savage

applied in his 1976 fanzine *London's Outrage*. 'As for the kink gear', Savage speculated, 'it fits a peculiarly English kind of decay; perversity thru repression given true expression'. To the right, Margaret Thatcher prepared to enact the necessary discipline, a 'Mother Sadist' to a supine nation.⁵⁶

Informing such analysis was Wilhelm Reich, whose work Savage cut 'n' spliced to decorate his fanzine and whose ideas McLaren discussed with David May in *Gallery International*. 'If ideas like his [Reich's] became more significant', McLaren said, 'then what I am doing [in SEX] would appear to be very ordinary'.⁵⁷ Reich, who married sexual repression to political oppression and fused Freud with Marx to analyse fascism, saw sexual gratification as the key to personal freedom. A sexual and moral revolution was needed to overcome the suppressive structures of bourgeois society, Reich insisted. McLaren concurred: 'if people were upfront about their sexual responses, I think the whole politics of this country would change'.⁵⁸ What was needed, he said, 'was a bit of sexual liberation' and, though he recognised the problems of promoting this through commodification and consumption, 'it is the best thing I can be doing at the moment and I try to do it in as political a way as possible'.⁵⁹

Here, then, lay the attack on 'the system' that Westwood spoke of in *Forum*. McLaren, however, envisaged a more violent upheaval born of a brutal century that gave rise to the 'gruesome images' now '[pervading] the various SM magazines'. The array of sexual practices formulated through 'all these feelings ... the environment you live in ... the way you were brought up ... school' needed to be liberated. And 'if I take my fantasies to the extreme', he mused, then 'it is because the extremity is where it's at'.⁶⁰

Punk and sex: two minutes and fifty seconds of squelching noises

As it happened, the Sex Pistols were not well enough endowed for sexual revolution. The band's members offered a mix of crude masculinity – summed up by Steve Jones' admitting 'I was all about a quick shag and see you later' (albeit on the back of an abusive childhood) – and Johnny Rotten's scrawny disaffection.⁶¹ Where the former was always on the lookout for a furtive fumble, the latter exuded a sexlessness exacerbated by such quotes as 'love is two minutes and fifty seconds of squelching noises'.⁶² His friend Sid Vicious claimed to find people 'very unsexy. I don't enjoy that side of life [...] I personally look upon myself as one of the most sexless monsters ever'.⁶³ True, there had been efforts early on to infuse the band with a sense of seditious sexuality. One formative Sex Pistols' gig saw Jordan reveal all on stage in an attempt to disconcert the studied ennui of London's self-appointed glitterati at a party hosted by the artist and socialite Andrew Logan. Another showcase event was held in the Soho strip club El Paradiso. But if the apocryphal story of McLaren's suggesting the band write an S&M-themed song is true, then the fact Rotten turned 'Submission' into a 'submarine mission' heading 'down down' to 'watery love' suggests the band took such schtick with a pinch of salt.⁶⁴

McLaren himself had an awkward relationship with sex. Brought up by his grandmother while his mother carried out numerous affairs, McLaren recognised he was 'fascinated with it [sex] from a fetishist point of view'.⁶⁵ '[I was] not scared of sex', he admitted in a 1995 interview, but found it 'a world that I didn't really know how to venture into in any major way'.⁶⁶ By all accounts, his and Westwood's relationship was tempestuous and sexually erratic: both were involved (awkwardly) with other partners and, like Rotten, their wearing SEX clothes desexualised fetishism rather than intensified it. The overt sexuality of SEX, Jon Savage noted, became an 'abstraction of sex'.⁶⁷

Simultaneously, McLaren's threshold for boredom was low, meaning he was constantly searching for creative stimulation. His musical antenna had attuned to the New York Dolls, who he briefly collaborated with in early 1975, feeding into the emergent punk scene in New York that spawned Richard Hell, Television and others. He was by this time already half-heartedly managing the fledgling Sex Pistols, to whom he gave greater attention from August 1975 when John Lydon joined to become Johnny Rotten. Akin to their fascination with fetishism, McLaren and Westwood began to incorporate other extremes into their designs, capturing again a *mood* of 1975–76. In a world beset by economic tumult and political instability, not to mention left-wing terrorist factions/brigades and, in Britain, the National Front's reinvigoration of the far-right, so anarchist quotes and images of Marx festooned their shirts and accessories. Infamously, the swastika became part of punk's arsenal: clashing symbols signifying the political gestalt and evoking the 1930s' descent into chaos. As 1976 became 1977, therefore, SEX transformed into Seditious with a new range of outfits and a refitted shop showcasing motifs of destruction. 'Destroy' muslins and T-shirts were sold next to images of a bombed-out Dresden, for which signifiers of power and oppression – the swastika, a crucifix, the monarchy – were détourned or defaced. Concurrently, as the notoriety of the Sex Pistols increased, McLaren eased into his role as an anti-manager and Jamie Reid's artwork framed the band in ways that eclipsed the sexual politics of SEX. Generating controversy by demystifying the music industry and exposing the 'No Future' of 'England's dreaming' became paramount.

Despite such a shift, the dissemination of SEX's mission was interesting. Residual SEX ideas and stylings permeated media spaces and public places to subvert and reimagine in equal measure. In the pornographic press where SEX clothes first found exposure, the boldness of McLaren and Westwood's designs were soon codified to ensure such signifiers as

spikey hair, horror make-up and safety pins became yet more fodder for the insatiable sex industry.⁶⁸

Through SEX, too, those congregating as a proto-punk coterie were oft found on the sexual margins, drawn both by their own sexual proclivities and a unifying sense of outsiderdom. Louise's, a lesbian club on Soho's Poland Street, was a regular haunt, as was the gay hangout El Sombrero and Linda Ashby's home at the St James Hotel in London's Buckingham Gate SW1. Ashby worked from her flat as a *mâîtresse* and bought 'equipment' from SEX, becoming in the process the landlady for Jordan and associated friends. Even The Roxy – the first renowned London punk club – was hosted in a dilapidated gay bar called Chaguaramas, a coming together repeated elsewhere in the UK as young punks sought sanctuary from a hostile 'straight' world.⁶⁹

As to whether exposure to such spaces and places led to sexual liberation, the evidence is unclear. Though Westwood and Jordan spoke in admiring terms of SEX's rubber devotees, endeavouring to understand the feelings and sensations induced by the clothes they sold, neither admitted to experiencing sexual frisson through fetish.⁷⁰ For some, such as Dorothy 'Max' Prior as she navigated her proto-punk creativity with work as a stripper, there did seem to be some 'polymorphous perversity abounding' among her friends frequenting SEX and Louise's.⁷¹ To be sure, Linda Ashby opened portals to hidden worlds and desires.⁷² When Ashby 'was on the whipping sessions' in 1976, fifteen-year-old Debbie Wilson remembered 'camping it up down Park Lane with a gang of trannies. All my friends [...] were on the game'.⁷³ Indeed, Berlin recalled hosting a bed-hopping 'baby bondage party' that culminated in cum-splattered purple sheets and whip-marks streaking the polystyrene ceiling of his parents' suburban home.⁷⁴ But while Berlin's own journey into an imagined world of Jean Genet, William Burroughs and Christopher Isherwood led to encounters both intense

and terrifying, accounts from London's Roxy club suggest dalliances no more (or less) remarkable than nightlife shenanigans either side of punk.⁷⁵ Perhaps, as both Vivien Goldman and Viv Albertine suggested, 'punk love' affected the functional and unemotional, demystifying sex's allure as much as its taboo via 'Loud groans and yelps heard through a club toilet door clash[ing] with the thrash of a band onstage; a handjob fountains cum, ruins a vintage velvet frock on the backseat of [...] a late night 57 bus [...]; struggling with your bondage trousers for a three's up on a mattress [...] in a bare boards squat bedroom'; blowjobs born only of inquisitiveness and nothing else to do.⁷⁶ No doubt, different people had different experiences in different ways in different places. Goldman's and Albertine's evocations of handjobs and blowjobs point to a lop-sided gendering of punk's sexual 'liberation'. At the very least, however, punk enabled connections across sexual diversity and challenged sexual norms/expectations, albeit partially and with suitably teenage irreverence.⁷⁷

Style-wise, subsequent McLaren/Westwood designs – such as the Joe Orton inspired gay-punk orgy T-shirt ('Prick Up Your Ears') – maintained the theme of sexual provocation. More immediately, the diffusion of punk stylings away from the King's Road briefly cultivated what the Sex Pistols' acolyte Nils Stevenson reputedly called a 'St Trinian's look': school blazers or shirts adorned and defaced, which young punk women offset with miniskirts, no skirts, stockings, tights and/or heels.⁷⁸ This, as Stevenson's comment reveals, triggered stereotypical ideas about the 'sexy schoolgirl' and lacked the panache of the original SEX crowd, who in turn were oft-dismissed as 'poseurs' and 'stuck up'.⁷⁹ More to the point, the DIY aesthetic that defined and evolved through punk soon widened beyond the initial impetus of SEX, with young male punks proving especially unresponsive or unwilling – maybe too embarrassed/naïve/immature – to engage with and extend the sexual revolt instigated from

King's Road. As a result, overt sexuality was diluted as punk's bricolage style drew from a broader range of symbols/signifiers and the culture evolved across a range of (often overlapping) scenes and musical forms. Ultimately, perhaps, the slow emergence of goth into the mid-1980s best traced the transmission of SEX's dark sexual aesthetic, fusing aspects of fetishwear with gothic tropes to formulate a distinct and long-lasting subculture. Or, not wholly coincidentally, we might look to the development of clubs and magazines such as *Skin Two/Skin Two* that reimagined fetishism and the aesthetics of sexuality within the context of 'lifestyle'.

Creatively, SEX's 'revolution' found responses both astute and crude. It was after visiting SEX in 1976 that Poly Styrene wrote 'Oh Bondage Up Yours' for her band X-Ray Spex, recording in her diary that reading Reich gave her 'a new sense of freedom [...] stimulated my brain cells. Am I over intellectual now [?] Saw some silly S&M imagery [...] and thought "Oh Bondage Up Yours!" "Oh Bondage No More!"'⁸⁰ For Styrene, punk signalled a way out of the sexual tropes that bound female expression. Her dismissal of S&M imagery also denoted an alternative reading of fetishism, recognising how the male gaze might embellish sex whilst maintaining the conventional lines of gender relations.

Soon to play only their second gig in support to X-Ray Spex, Adam and the Ants also found inspiration at 430 King's Road. Adam Ant (Stuart Goddard) was seduced by the deviant allure of SEX, obsessing about Jordan (who managed/collaborated with the Ants) and committing to use sex 'as my source material'. As well as 'pure fuck songs' ('Red Scab', 'Physical'), he explored the dynamics of fetishism across lyrics with titles such as 'Beat My Guest', 'Rubber People' and 'Bathroom Function'. Given Ant spent two years at Hornsey art college writing an unfinished dissertation on the artist Allen Jones, his interest in all things sexual came with an artistic twist. Visually, his band drew heavily from stylised readings of

S&M, with gig posters and badges comprising text and imagery culled from John Willie's *The Adventures of Sweet Gwendoline* (1974) and similar publications. Increasingly, too, Ant's punk-infused fascination with fascism fed into songs referencing Weimar chic or the sexual charge oft-presumed to tremor beneath the Nazi veneer. 'I'm not personally into S/M', Ant insisted. 'It's the power, it's the imagery [...] which I find magnetic [and which] appeals to my imagination'.⁸¹ As for the point and purpose, Ant echoed SEX's Reichian line prior to his pop-star breakthrough in 1980: 'I felt there were sexual repressions and taboos making people oppressed [...] but not being dealt with. I wanted to bring it out and push it to the limits'.⁸²

Beyond SEX's immediate devotees, Manchester's Buzzcocks extended the Reichian motif through the New Hormones label set up with Richard Boon to release the *Spiral Scratch* EP in early 1977: catalogue number ORG-1. Their next single, 'Orgasm Addict' (1977), was fronted by a sexually explicit image provided by their friend Linder (Linda Mulvey). The song was a speedy, jittery homage to lustful teenage urges. The sleeve – a naked female torso with an iron for a head and smiles covering the nipples – was one of a series of photomontages created by Linder to explore how media images commodified and codified the female body. 'I collected images of women that mirrored every facet of social and sexual attitudes at the time', Linder recalled, 'lifting up the bonnet of the culture car and studying its engineering to understand it'. Far more *critical* than SEX's designs, Linder's work was informed by punk's approach to reveal the fragility of gender constructs, demystifying and exposing mediated depictions of sex and sexuality.⁸³

Pornography was also used by Cosey Fanni Tutti (Christine Newby).⁸⁴ Cosey was part of the art collective COUM Transmissions that morphed into Throbbing Gristle in 1975–76, thereby helping forge what became industrial music. Developing parallel with punk, industrial culture shared an obsession with all things abject and taboo but went further with regard

probing mechanisms of socio-political control and the (often violent) outer-limits of human behaviour. Throbbing Gristle's Peter Christopherson took some early photographs of the Sex Pistols, the rent boy and delinquent overtones of which have been noted.⁸⁵

In October 1976, COUM's exhibition at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) all but pre-empted the media furore that enveloped the Sex Pistols a few weeks later. Called 'Prostitution', the show featured Cosey's work as a pornographic model, her image culled from top-shelf magazines and repositioned within the walls of the (publicly-funded) art establishment. Though COUM performances often included sex as part of their confronting social and cultural convention, Cosey's being a stripper and a model more pertinently challenged the interface between art, pornography and life itself. As this suggests, Cosey understood her work to be an investigation, a process of self-exploration. 'Sex is beautiful & ugly, tender & brutal both physically & mentally', she explained.⁸⁶ Her art served to decode pornography, revealing to her sexual archetypes and the power dynamics of a sex industry that transformed Cosey/Christine into 'Millie from Ross-on-Wye' or 'Nanette' the nurse from a sex-change clinic.⁸⁷ In the process, 'Prostitution' saw Cosey and COUM described as 'Sadistic [...] the wreckers of civilisation' by the Tory MP Nicholas Fairbairn in the *Daily Mail*. To decorate the story, Siouxsie Sioux and others from SEX were pictured entering the ICA.

We could go on, referring to the ugly sex references of The Stranglers or, from the other extreme, Alternative TV's brilliant undermining of rock 'n' roll potency via 'Love Lies Limp'. Fast forward to 1983 and Frankie Goes to Hollywood emerged from Liverpool's punk milieu with 'Relax', a number one single that found controversy in a style, lyric and video that rekindled the subterranean homosexual practices aestheticised in SEX. But as more-and-more bands formed and more-and-more records were released, so punk's sexual provocations became buried beneath a combination of speed, spit and social realism. The culture quickly

evolved, diffusing and refracting to reflect new moods and varied sensibilities. Just as sex transformed into sedition, so punk's anger turned to alienation and other affectations. In the time it took to play a three-minute punk 7", the squelching noises all but stopped.

Leaving the twentieth century: Oh Bondage up yours!

With the demise of the Sex Pistols in January 1978 (and Westwood's turning towards haute couture), Malcolm McLaren proved himself not quite finished with sexual subversion. Just as his countercultural forebears propagated the emancipation of youthful desire⁸⁸, so McLaren continued to do so whilst also exposing/exploiting the paedophilic tendencies that pulsed through the music industry. First, his plan for a film about the Sex Pistols (eventually realised as *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* in 1980) toyed with pornographic subplots before succumbing to multiple rewrites and reimagining. In the event, the film culminated with the porn star Mary Millington having sex with Steve Jones before the lewd folk song 'Friggin' in the Riggin' [aka 'Good Ship Venus'] ushered people out of the cinemas – rather than out of the twentieth century as the situationists urged.⁸⁹

Second, McLaren formed Bow Wow Wow in 1980, recruiting the thirteen-year-old Annabella Lwin as singer. Not surprisingly, Lwin's age caused controversy, especially when she appeared naked on a record sleeve enacting Édouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner Sur l'Herbe* (1862/3). There were other issues too: lyrics penned by McLaren that drew from pornographic filmscripts written whilst on sojourns to Paris in 1979; the plan to market the band's first cassette-only album on the front of a magazine the drew from paedophilic slang – *Chicken* – and proposed to feature images of kids posing alongside articles on 'pleasure tech'.⁹⁰ Generally, however, the music press were *au fait* with McLaren's schemes, framing Bow Wow Wow as such and never taking too seriously the talk of 'pornography for kids'.⁹¹

More generally, this was a period in which ‘naughty’ schoolgirls and schoolgirl uniforms were a staple of the licit sexual landscape, be it openly via bawdy comedy or implicitly in the tabloids’ fascination with topless teenage models. Throughout the 1970–80s, the lines of youthful *heterosexuality* remained blurred enough to establish ‘groupies’ as a recognised part of rock ‘n’ roll culture and allow the likes of Jimmy Savile to abuse despite the ‘rumours’ John Lydon revealed at the time. Such rumours, he said, ‘we all know about but are not allowed to talk about’.⁹²

SEX and the Sex Pistols must therefore be located within the late twentieth century’s broader grappling with the contested processes of liberalisation, commercialisation, commodification and media saturation. To be a ‘Sex Pistol’ was to be young, free and primed to destroy the socio-cultural strictures that bound and repressed. As this suggests, the transgression of perceived norms was part of the thrill, as was the discovery (and revelation) of all things hidden and forbidden. But it was the act and the agency – ‘I wanna *be* Anarchy’ – that mattered most, soon brokering initiatives and aesthetics beyond the confines of sex or sexuality. If SEX’s revolution was sometimes messy and occasionally lost in a miasma of nihilism and abjection, then its ‘political statement’ remained liberatory: an invitation to live in *the now* and ‘Fuck forever’.

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- ¹⁵ Gorman, *The Life and Times*, p. 195.
- ¹⁶ Richmond, 'Buy Sexual', pp. 21–2.
- ¹⁷ David May, 'Sado Sex for the Seventies', *Gallery International*, 1:4 (1976), p. 62.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 62.
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- ²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 11.
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