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Review: Red, White and Blue: CHELSEA space

The latest exhibition within CHELSEA space is a mix of juxtapositions and visual contradictions. Even the position of the gallery (physically within an educational campus and ideologically with no responsibility to a funding body or commercial interest) is locked in the eye-line of Tate Britain's traditional Britannia. It seemed to me that the exhibition is attempting a punk manifesto of its own: flag burning, doing its own thing and sticking its middle fingers directly up at an institution that embodies our pre-conceived ideas of nationality, tradition and British-ness.

The exhibition itself has a very linear narrative which can be divided into three chapters, screen immersion in the first room, collaged billboard on the corridor and conclusion of a traditional open white gallery space. The success of the pathway I believe hangs on what integral politics were intended by the exhibition. If it was intended as a representation of the multiple strands that make up the ideology of punk and issues of nationality (which was how I read it before the guided tour with Donald Smith) then the layout of the exhibition was very consistent, from the in-your-face of the introductory video room to the sanitization of the finale. It was a clear allegory of punk politics going from confrontational to something we can examine and stroke our chins at within the gallery context. However if the exhibition was meant to be anarchic in its nature and for its contents meaning to be constructed by the audience, I think it suffered from the very thing Smith said it was important to avoid '*The curator should not have a big idea and bend the artists to their work*'. It is a post modern ideal to make something new from the work you start with (without damaging the original) and here CHELSEA space has succeeded in creating a new effect from images that already have strong popular culture associations (The '*image-bank of pop and punk*') but I felt in some areas this is contradicted by a sort of 'pan-culture' - a potentially playful but over saturation of images that have thus lost their individual power.

For example the overload of videos in the first room is claustrophobic and visually muddled yet that is paradoxically its strength in its reflection of the politics of punk. Smith referred to *The Man who Fell to Earth* where Newton feels overcome after watching multiple mediocre televisions. Interestingly, as the room contains many re-interpretations and reconstructions (*Jordan's Britannia, God Save the Queen*) this scene from *The Man who fell to Earth* has itself been re-interpreted many times in popular culture. The one I was reminded of (before Smith mentioned Bowie!) was the robot in *Short Circuit* who gathers information on humanity by watching multiple televisions repeating '*More Input! More Input!*'¹ Just like that robot, the audience experiences a simultaneous over-saturation of images but when broken down and mixed (in a way that could be constructed by the viewer, e.g. I enjoyed listening to *Laibach Anglia* video whilst watching *Jordan's Dance*) they aligned into something strangely consistent if perhaps less powerful than if experienced separately. The sheer influx of visual meant a true punk experience where, whilst the message may be confused, it was certainly not mumbled.

Punk has been described as '*a bricolage of every previous youth culture that existed in the West since the second World War stuck together with safety pins*'². The exhibition has a similar feel, with an overload of images relating to *Pop, Punk, Politics, Place*³ mixed together to be reconstructed and interpreted by the audience. The billboard method of display along the second chapter invites the viewer to 'read' the images up and down, acrostic, however they chose, seems to me almost like a conversation between the viewer and the image as

they are forced to look and look again, to strain the neck upwards to see those at the top of the wall. There are also two contexts for the viewing of the second chapter, directly in front of it or in the last room, softened somehow by seeing it through the glass wall. I found it another instance of the visual contradictions of the exhibition that it was more comfortable and easier to contemplate the art from through the glass but it no longer had the same impact.

These decisions about how to view and construct meaning in the artworks are extended even further in the third chapter. It was interesting to have seen the exhibition in two different contexts, once at the private view with the list of works and once with Smith who certainly provided '*More Input!*'. For example *Phantom 1 & 2, 2012* by Neil Clements, is referred in the list of works as '*referencing the specific shape of the body of Ian Curtis' guitar*' but also that '*the works also require the presence of the viewer to complete the meaning of the work*'. After a brilliant full explanation of the work by Smith, I couldn't help thinking that that ideal viewer was intended to view the meaning through his eyes. It led me to question whether an exhibition ever has the potential to be a primary resource, if they could ever be truly collaborative in terms of interpretation extended to the gallery visitor.

Themes of nationality and pageantry run through the exhibition, from the title to the various image of Britannia, motifs and the Union Jack. I was struck by Michael Bracewell's writing on the flags as '*a patriotic sign and de-contextualised transgressive identity*'. The flag is torn up and put back together as a new flag for a new time. Punk politics, despite connotations with Neo-Nazism, is traditionally left wing and the exhibition (especially present in works such as Peter Blake's '*Found Art: Britannia 2011* and *Clash Union Flag 1978*) intelligently challenges the notion of Punk as anti-establishment, instead clearly expressing their desire for a new establishment. John Lydon of the Sex Pistols, in a recent interview on the world service said: '*We do need flags, we do need pageantry to unite us in our multi layered culture*'⁴

The whole exhibition gives an a punk impression of rip it up, pin it back together how you wish and be aware that that is pinned and not built to last and yet after Smith's talk it was clear to me that there was a 'correct' interpretation already embedded and the results were on display, it is purely an aesthetic of anarchy.

References:

¹ Badham, J. *Short Circuit*. 1986, David Foster Productions

² Savage, J. *Teenage: The Creation of Youth Culture*. 2007: Viking. England.

³ Red White and Blue, Exhibition Literature

⁴ Interview with John Lydon on BBC World Service: *Revolutions per Minute* (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p010n7vv>) 24 November 2012