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Practice in Context (ADAD5004): Protest, Punk & Change

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Proposed Question for Independent Inquiry:

How Can Art Effect Change within Culture?

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This essay is an exploration of three key words, accompanied by three images that relate to artists and thinkers. These words will be punk, protest and change. Within the research for these words, I will also be focusing on three artists: Guy Debord (punk), the Artists' Suffrage League (protest), Riot Grrrl (change). This research will give me a greater understanding of each word. I will then attempt to link the key words together to form a question that will later be developed in third year.

Protest

History has shown us that inequality in society has always been a problem. One issue in particular would be sexism, "individuals' sexism serves to exacerbate inequality in their society's gender hierarchy" (Brandt, 2011, p. 1413). The individual has more influence than they think. Their prejudice opinions can make life harder for those who they deem to be lesser than themselves. People affected by problems like this will often rebel against the majority as a way of demanding change. One way they do this is by protesting. "The ongoing interactions between challengers and the world around them determine not only the immediate outcomes of a social movement but also its developed and potential difference over time" (Meyer, 2004, p. 125). Going against what society tells you can impact future generations and how other people perceive the world around us. Protest is essential to making your voice heard in some way. One group of people who went against the norms of society were first-wave feminists. "Feminism, the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes" (Burkett. E, 2021). These women saw that society favoured men over themselves and decided to protest knowing their actions could influence others and future generations. This steered them in a direction

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that they knew could possibly result in change. An important feminist group in particular would be the Suffragettes, a group of women who challenged authority and fought for the right to vote. "Their militant campaigning sometimes included unlawful and violent acts which attracted much publicity" (UK Parliament, 2021). They were determined to get their point across and wanted to be taken seriously in the process. Another group called the Suffragists had the same views but acted in a more peaceful way. "In the early 20th century, after the suffragists failed to make significant progress, a new generation of activists emerged" (British Library Learning, 2018). The group that would later be known as the Suffragettes saw that women were still at a disadvantage and wanted them to reclaim their power however, both of these groups had something in common; they both used art as a way to get through to people with opposing opinions. During their marches they would present to the public an array of banners and signs. "The suffrage banners proclaimed a collective will at their rallies, creating unforgettable spectacles to tell of women's contribution to social, economic and political life" (Hunter, 2018). These banners reminded the public how important woman have been in society and. A notable association that helped the protesters were the Artists' Suffrage League, a group of women with artistic talent who designed and created pieces to emphasise the message that was trying to be spread. "Art, in the form of banners, posters, postcards and newspaper cartoons, gave a visual dimension to the Votes for Women campaign" (Museum of London, 2021). Images allow the creator to add more emotion to the message being given and force the public to think more about the meaning of the pieces. They're usually more eye catching than just words, making them an important part of a protest.



Figure #1:

The Bugler Girl, (1908)

A great example of an image that depicts the aspects of the Suffragettes protests would be *The Bugler Girl*, (1908), created by Caroline Watts, that can be seen in Figure #1. Confidence is captured by a woman with her head held high, standing proud while she uses her bugle to bring attention to the message on the poster. Capital letters have also been used to emphasise the importance of this message, "the quality of our treatment of letters on a page can influence how people respond to our message." (Wong, 2011, p.277). As well as this, Watts has used shades of red throughout the poster, possibly to allow the public to spot it easily on the street. "Colours as means to create aesthetic experience is particularly essential as attractive packages

are found to attract more attention than unattractive packages (Stoll et al., 2008, p.289)". In the background you can also see a sun shining. This could represent the dawn of a new day, symbolising a fresh start and new beginnings. The woman is seen wearing armour and a sword, as if she is ready to go into battle, while also wearing a skirt as a way of being proud of her femininity. As writer, Elizabeth Crawford, quotes a National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies governing-council member "her sword is sheathed by her side; it is there, but not drawn, and if it were drawn, it would not be the sword of the flesh, but of the spirit. For ours is not a warfare against men, but against evil" (Crawford, 2014). The governing-council member clearly states that they aren't against men. It tells us that these women were ready to sacrifice what they had in order for men and women to have equal rights.

Punk

Much like the suffragettes, the punks were also known for rebelling against the norms of society, "punk challenged metanarratives of morality, culture, and aesthetics. The basis of punks' rebellion was ideology, not politics" (Goli, 2020. p.106). They too were also a major part of society, stemming from the UK's working class and being taken advantage of by the upper class. The working class' class consciousness increased and some formed their own self-sufficient community. It was a subculture that was very anti-authority and always questioned conformity. They created art in many different forms that show this. Going against capitalism, they embraced DIY as a way of being self sufficient, once again rebelling against popular culture in society. "People within punk culture created their own independent record labels, music stores, performance venues, and fanzines as part of their quest for authenticity" (Drass, 2016).

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This was the subculture's response to capitalism at the time, challenging its norms and values with hopes of being more connected to the community by ditching a manufactured way of creating. You could almost say that the punks had a rather macro approach when it came to how they were influenced. "Macro-level sociology looks at large-scale social processes, such as social stability and change" (Lumen, 2021). This meant that they were influenced by things outside of themselves; they understood the beliefs and ideas of the government and didn't agree with them. As a result, they rebelled. Their way of being inspired could be compared to the theory of situationism. This theory revolves around the idea that an individual will change based on the things around them rather than due to the characteristics of the person. A creative community based around the idea of situationism was called the Situationist International. "The Situationist International (SI) argued that a revolution would take place in the realm of everyday life because the alienating effects of capitalism were pervasive in modern society" (Britannica, 2019). As capitalism was in the way of the authentic process of creativity, authentic art could not be produced. Creations would simply be filtered by capitalism to only show what would appeal to the masses. Capitalism would see the creative as a product to be sold rather than a person who has something important to say.

Punks and people who followed situationism's ideas were quite similar, both movements emphasised their feelings of othering in society. Situationists "agreed with Marx that the production of commodities for profit is the main goal of a capitalist system and this leads to alienation" (Ingham, 2016). These movements have problems with the divide that capitalism creates as it pushes the idea that people need to constantly consume things in order to feel fulfilled. As mentioned before, punk culture emerged from the frustration of working class

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individuals being exploited by the ruling class. Capitalism's insistence on promoting consumer culture was interfering with the importance of authenticity and fairness by focusing on profit. The Situationist International liked to bring awareness to things that were usually hidden and not highlighted in pop culture. They want to wake people up through art by emphasising things that would be classed as mundane but relatable to everybody. A perfect example of this would be something called psychogeography. Famous member of the Situationist International, Guy Debord, created this term and described it as "the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of the individuals" (Souzis, 2015, p.194).



Figure #2:

Guide psychogéographique de Paris. Discours sur les passions de l'amour, (1957)

It highlights the feelings of an individual and how their experience is altered based on surroundings, representing this through the symbolism of imagery. One example of the depiction of emotions would be *Guide psychogéographique de Paris. Discours sur les passions de l'amour*, (1957), that can be seen in figure #2. Figure #2 shows us a randomised combination of the map of Paris. Between each line lies a sequence of red pathways, indicating one's journey through the city. The rearranged locations symbolise the individual's ever-changing journey based on how they're feeling due to their current location. This irregular manner of planting the locations on the image is a technique called *detournement*. The technique has been described as "the use and recombination of available cultural items such as phrases, parts of books, images, film footage and soundtracks" (Vicas, 1998, p.381). It's a way of forcing the audience to think about the lost meaning within the piece through changes and alterations of

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the original. Figure #2's appearance links back to the Situationist International's dislike of built environments created for the benefit of the economy. Debord has chosen to randomly redirect the journey through the city to show that capitalism can't brainwash the individual when they're allowing their authentic intuition to guide them through the city. The person won't be taking the encouraged route that will only benefit the economy. This means that Debord was inspired by the types of buildings around him to create this map. This goes back to psychogeography's idea that one's feelings and behaviours are shaped by what's physically around the individual.

Change

The suffragettes and punk movement were both inspiring times for many people. So much so, that they caused change within different areas society. To change something is to alter something's original state. The first wave feminists were an important part of history that caused change, inspiring generations to come, and influencing many parts of society. Women were given the right to vote but were still treated unfairly. Decades later, the punk movement saw women of the time finding their voices and using their frustration to create forms of art with bold statements. "Their vocal timbres resembled those of aggressive children taunting each other in the playground, but their message was strong, emphasizing independence and defiance" (Reddington, 2004, p. 440). This anarchistic way of protesting was looking very similar to the ways of the suffragettes. Throughout the music scene and pop culture, women were beginning to be seen differently. "This move of female empowerment aimed at reclaiming the multigendered spaces of the initial punk movement" (Dunn & Farnsworth, 2012, p.138). Pop

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culture throughout the world had developed a lot since the first wave feminists brought attention to sexism in society. Women found that music was an easy and creative way to reach a bigger audience than before. This can be classed as a way that society has changed. An example of a subculture formed from feminism and punk would be Riot Grrrl. "By the late 1980s/early 1990s, a female-led backlash to the male appropriation of the punk scene was underway" (Dunn & Farnsworth, 2012, p.138). Formed through the lack of female presentation in punk, this subculture was a safe space for women to create art in various forms, promoting female empowerment and equality for all. Riot Grrl allowed women to come together and communicate their thoughts and feelings through art. "At its core, Riot Grrrl was committed to girl empowerment and self-representation. Central to these goals was the creation of alternative media and DIY self-publishing" (Dunn & Farnsworth, 2012, p.136). It was important that these people could come together and listen to each other to continue the process of change. One woman who was involved with this movement was Kathleen Hanna. Kathleen was a member of the band Bikini Kill and later joined other feminist punk bands to form Riot Grrrl. Before this collaboration, Bikini Kill was making a band zine. Inside the zines included personal messages from the band, pictures and songs. These zines would then be handed out at shows with hopes that the reader would understand more about the bands intentions and the words they have to say. The zines were very authentic and presented a sense of vulnerability from the women who created them. They "are a compendium of both personal and manifesto writing, thoughts on music, prejudices, violence, feminism, grassroots and intimate activism, all reappropriating the cut, paste, and scribble punk aesthetic" (Paja, 2021). These zines did not

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forget punk values of authenticity and also encouraged women to become part of the community. An example of a page from a zine created by Kathleen can be seen in Figure #3.

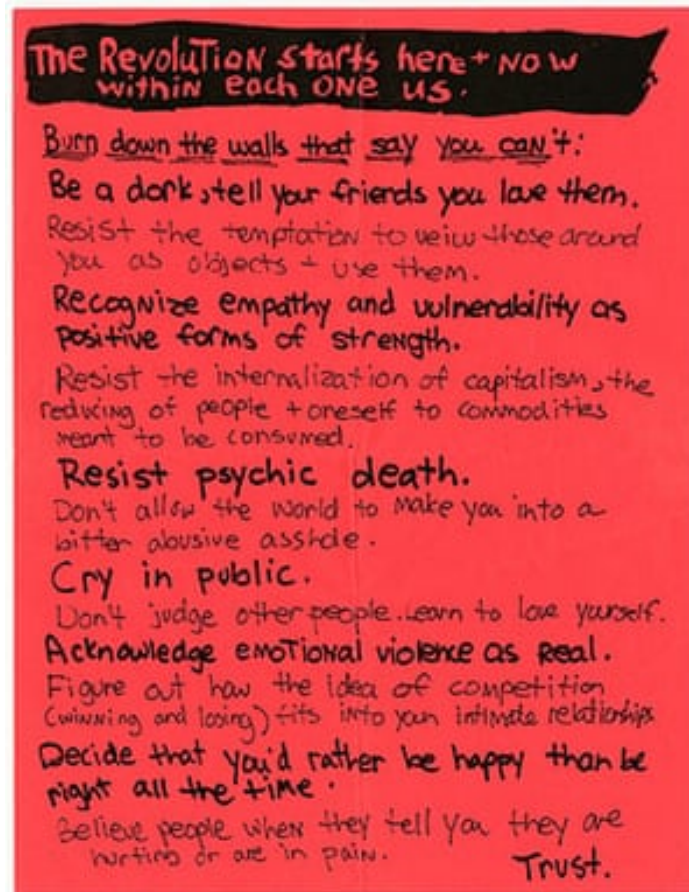


Figure #3:

The Revolution Starts Here + Now Within Each One Us (1989)

In Figure #3 we can see a flyer Kathleen made with instructions of how to start the “revolution” to which she was referencing her hopes for change within the community. This is more commonly known as a manifesto. It has been written in her own handwriting, creating a personal touch to the image. “Our selection of fonts shows readers at a glance whether the document is stately or humble, formal or informal, creative or technical” (Wong, 2011, p.277).

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The reader will be able to get a sense of how much this meant to her as she wrote it herself. Creating something with vulnerability takes a lot of bravery. At the time, Kathleen was volunteering at a domestic-violence shelter. This tells us that she was inspired by different parts of the community and wanted to support their main messages, hoping to educate more people. Black and red have also been used as the main colours for this manifesto. "Red is associated with anger and excitement" (Hanada, M. 2018, p.224). These feelings can be present when you want to change something or if something is changing. The solid colour compliments the bold statements and show that she wanted to get straight to the point by instantly catching your eye. As well as this the letter was created to fold up, making it easy to hand out and spread the word, something that is very important when you want to make change within society.

Throughout this research, I have genuinely been inspired. Realising how grateful I am for the women who have fought for me and also learning about how much capitalism can destroy the human spirit. With this newfound enthusiasm, next year I shall aim to write an essay with a title that links my three words together inspired by the change that I have learnt about. This title will be "How Can Art Effect Change within Culture?"

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Debord, G (1957) *Guide psychogéographique de Paris. Discours sur les passions de l'amour* [Lithograph] Available at: <https://www.frac-centre.fr/en/art-and-architecture-collection/debord-guy/guide-psychogeographique-paris-discours-sur-les-passions-l-amour-317.html?authID=53&ensembleID=135> (Accessed: 14/07/21)

Figure #3:

Hanna, K (1989) *The Revolution Starts Here + Now Within Each One Us* [Flyer] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/music/gallery/2013/jun/30/punk-music> (Accessed: 19/07/21)