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English Composition As A Happening

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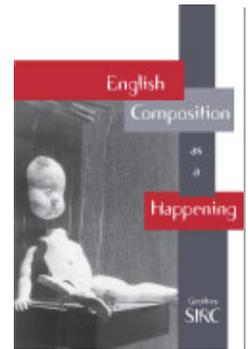
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NEVER MIND THE TAGMEMICS, WHERE'S THE SEX PISTOLS?

They said that oblivion was their ruling passion. They wanted to reinvent everything each day; to become the masters and possessors of their own lives. . . . The progress achieved in the domination of nature was not yet matched by a corresponding liberation of everyday life. Youth passed away among the various controls of resignation.

Guy Debord

Our story begins, as always, with lack and desire. It's 1975, the year *On Righting Writing: Classroom Practices in Teaching English 1975–1976* appeared, in answer to the “great concern for the quality of student writing” (Clapp *vii*) expressed in an open meeting on classroom practices at the 1974 convention of NCTE. The preface to this the thirteenth report from the Committee on Classroom Practices informs us that “there was no doubt in the mind of anyone attending the meeting that the improvement of writing instruction should be the theme of this [report]” (*vii*). Whether or not the variety of practices offered in this collection could ever lead to improved writing instruction is anyone's guess. In many respects, any pedagogical notion might provoke good writing, if an intriguing context were also provided. Take Mariana Gibson's piece in this collection, “Students Write Their Own Bicentennial Ballads”: she describes a strategy of deconstructing familiar bits of folklore like “Yankee Doodle” with her students, who were then asked to think of contemporary songs that might fit the genre of Americana folk-ballads (she suggests “Ode to Billy Joe” or “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down”). Afterwards, “the class is ready to write down their own ballads, using topics from our revolutionary era” (94). Depending on the classroom ecology, that might be an interesting class. Gibson's rationale for her lesson was based “upon the fact that much that happened in the fateful years of 1775, 1776, and 1777 was recorded and preserved in song” (93). Indeed, much that happened in the similarly fateful years of 1975–1977 was recorded and preserved in song, too. In fact, compositionists who read Gibson's article a couple years after it appeared might have found even better contemporary songs to explore—

say, “I’m So Bored with the USA” (1977). What’s unfortunate about this book—indeed, about post-Happenings Composition in general—is that what’s most compelling about the era is what’s left out of the scholarship. 1975 was an interesting year in the history of contemporary song; among other things, it was the year in which Malcolm McLaren spotted Johnny Rotten in Sex, his King’s Road clothing boutique. I’m not surprised the writers of *On Righting Writing* didn’t give that episode much play in their collection because, really, in 1975, who knew? But shouldn’t we be surprised that *CCC* of 1977–1980, when it had had ample time to hit, didn’t give *any* attention whatsoever to the revolutionary era of the popular that was Punk?

It’s an interesting question, the academy’s disinterest in Punk, and one that has begun to be taken up. According to Faulk:

The factors that made the recovery of Punk a belated event [are as] crucial, if necessarily more difficult to articulate, as anything we now have to say about either the music or the subculture. The notoriety of Punk . . . resides not simply in what was said . . . but in what Punk was silenced . . . for saying. (59)

And so I’d like to replay sounds from that silenced era; re-read the almost erased palimpsest of Punk, on which our field’s official history has been overwritten; poke around in a cultural parallelism—popular music and Composition theory (which once, in the late Sixties, rhymed in interesting ways)—to see what points can be made about the urges and counter-urges against which we work, and to better understand the powerful pedagogy that was lost when Happenings Composition vanished from our field.

Those who read the old copies of *CCC* 1968–1971 will have no trouble recalling what music flooded the airwaves then and what it meant to its listeners. Happenings Composition found it difficult to form its expressionist pedagogy exclusive of pop. In May 1968, Walker advises, “the bulk of our attention should be given to youth culture . . . if we expect to have an affirmative answer to the question . . . ‘Something is happening here, but you don’t know what it is, do you Mister Jones?’” (636). The popular was perceived as useful compositional material because it altered the established scene of academic writing. As Deemer urges: “Let the ‘teacher’ shock the student. . . . Let him discuss theology to Ray Charles records” (124). In December 1968, Kroeger, although grudgingly, realizes “we must know and empathize with our students Every college English

teacher ought to tune in to a local popular radio station once in a while, even if he must shudder throughout the whole experience" (337). And so Kroeger writes about an assignment in which his students do an analytical essay comparing "Eve of Destruction" with "Dawn of Correction." In October 1969, Carter proselytizes that for an instructor concerned with "the problem of getting the freshman to write something he cares about . . . there is in contemporary music a vast and rewarding writing potential for students" (228). And in December 1971, Litz reprints all of Ralph J. Gleason's liner notes for Miles Davis's *Bitches Brew*, tracing the way Gleason was influenced by Miles's phrasing, in order to advocate "a prose form that is a written analog to Davis's new music. This prose form may be called surrealistic writing. . . . [a prose to] break down the barrier which usually exists between writer and reader . . . loose, supple, hip and exactly right for the emotions stirred by the music of the album" (345, 347). (Ah, *Bitches Brew* . . . "'Bitches Brew' by Miles Davis. I loved that album," John Lydon recalls in his autobiography [81].)

For such teachers, popular music seemed an exciting natural landscape through which to chase "the wispish suggestion of a meaning which cannot be realized, the sense of a sense that is never absent at the same time it is never quite there" (Coles "The Sense of Nonsense" 28). Litz took his cue from Gleason ("this music is") to urge an indeterminate response to prose: "let's say it's just writing. This writing is" (354). But gradually such open-ended dreams were abandoned in favor of righting writing; traditional, determinate goals were re-affirmed. Writing could no longer just *be*, it had to be a certain way. That ongoing tension present in all arts, between the academic and the avant-garde, between the high and the low, was shifting in our field. The general debate was nicely dramatized at the 1970 CCCC. There, two convention addresses, one by Robert Heilman and one by Louis Kampf, both meant to articulate the theme of that year's annual meeting, "Foreseeing the 1970s," neatly captured the turn we took from the late Sixties to the late Seventies and today. Heilman, who had been teaching first-year writing since the fall of 1927, used his talk to urge Composition away from its interest in the trendy—its tendency to be "time's slaves, always ready, when slapped, to turn to the other chic" ("Except He Come" 231). (Several months earlier, in November 1969, in a speech at an NCTE meeting, Heilman had made perfectly clear his position on the subject of music in the classroom: "It tends to reduce the amount of reading by creating a thirst for the greater immediate

excitement of sound. . . . The classroom is for criticism. . . and it cannot be wise to attenuate it by the substitution of sensory experience which the age already supplies in excess" ["The Full Man" 242–243].) For him, Composition implied mastery of "an objective body of material" (233), one which led, through expertise, to the ordering of texts and selves and worlds. So he inveighed against late Sixties teachers who preached sincerity and relevance at the expense of rules. It was a matter of "indispensable" values: "the trained as against the wild, the tempered as against the raw, the aware as against the ignorant" (236). He closed his speech with a perfect metaphor: "The difference is that between the French Academy and Mardi Gras. . . . The ideal symbolised is civility, and civility is the ultimate victim of the I-want, I-turn-on, my-thing, carnival, id-powered style" (237). (Heilman, then, sounds not-so-uncannily like the British tabloid press in its civility-based outrage at the Sex Pistols: "The Foul Mouthed Yobs," screamed the headlines, "The Filth and the Fury!" "Who Are These Punks?" [Savage 263].) Kampf (who had been led away by the FBI from the 1969 CCCC for his anti-war activity) hated rule-governed composition; he felt rules were "one of our substitutes for the lost authority of church and family" (247) and resulted in "a talent for writing meaningless compositions on order" (246). His address to the opening session boils down to his assertion that "Composition courses should be eliminated, not improved: eliminated, because they help to support an oppressive system" (248). For Kampf, it was not a question of civility but economy: he knew what students were being trained, tempered and made aware for—Composition's implication in a system whereby "higher education . . . has been expanded to allow corporate capital better to exploit the quickening developments in technology" (247). He saw, in other words, how Composition enabled cheap holidays in other people's misery. To replace the academy's oppression he suggests a psychogeographic carnival in which students could simply *become* rather than write: "start by allowing students the free use of the freshman year to discover some things about their lives. Why are they in school? What is their social role? Why do they resent their freshman English teacher?" (249)

Competing presences, then. But one seems to mirror the reality of the foreseen Seventies, the other a dreamy counter-reality. By the time CCC 1976 rolls around, we can see what happened to Kampfian notions of liberating Composition from its institutional thrall: Gebhardt and Smith in February 1976 were cautioning that "'Liberation' Is Not

'License'" in discussing their program called *Self-Awareness Through Writing*. The writing in this program could not be "egoistic, overly personal, [or] chaotic. . . . [It] does not necessitate writing that is too subjective to communicate. . . . No, the key here lies in the discipline" (23). The quest for Heilman's "objective body of material" was in full effect. In the May 1976 *CCC*, Miles begins the ever-popular inventory "What We Already Know About Composition and What We Need to Know," followed by D'Angelo's search, not for wispish suggestions in Composition, but "intelligible structure." In 1978, Lunsford amasses an objective body of material on what we know (and don't) about basic writing, and Bizzell proceeds to shore up academic ramparts ("requir[ing] students to think about what kind of person the intellectual work of college seems to be asking them to be . . . consult[ing] our colleagues in other college departments [to determine whether] the ethos of historians, music theorists, chemists, present any common features" ["Ethos" 353, 355]), at the expense of the popular ("persuad[ing] our students that it is in their best interests to pursue their intellectual work beyond the television image" [355]). The popular was disappeared; it hurt our students: Bizzell, then, shared Heilman's rhetorically oriented distrust of the excess of non-academic sensory experience, blaming "the dearth of extended rational presentation of ideas on television" (351) for students' weak expository skills. Kampf, though, was the Anti-Bizzell; he knew the popular had nothing to do with students' weak writing, it was the fault of the academy's corporate-mindedness: "Our students will attain the confidence to use their language when they are able to face the world with a sense of who they are . . . when we create programs of study which do not require students to turn themselves into marketable products" (249). It's too bad Kampf couldn't have foreseen Punk, because it wound up doing exactly what he wanted Freshman English to do: provide "a resistance culture giving students a sense of a different world" (249). Probably the easiest way to capture the almost hallucinatory non-popular tone of *CCC* at that time is to give examples of the time-warped sampler sayings embroidered on those issue's covers: e.g., the February 1977 issue is decorated with the legend "Snow on a Robin's Tail"; "The Darling Buds of May" adorns May 1977. We read those quaint mottoes now and can only wonder about the world their writers felt was being exscribed.

For Mariana Gibson, then, to remain a pedagogue of popular music in 1975 made her a bold soul. For *CCC* 1976 can now be recorded as the

year the music died. Contemporary scholars of Composition Studies might have a difficult time believing that *CCC* 1977–1978 happened at the same time as the Sex Pistols. No surprise, perhaps; lack of enthusiasm for Punk had been institutionalized right from the start: “In the autumn of 1975, the mainstream music industry was not sympathetic to new groups that wanted to make an abrasive sociocultural noise” (Savage 123). For *CCC*, part of the elision lies in our field’s general preference for “the tempered as against the raw.” And when we do confess a taste for the raw, it’s usually rawness *en route* (to authority or voice); it’s rarely rawness *en abyme*. Even Elbow threw out all that lovely, foolish prewriting, seeing it merely as steps to the official formal version, “the processes that should occur on the way to that final draft” (*Writing* 7). As Hillocks wrote, the need was to “mov[e] beyond process . . . [to] focus on prewriting activities which help develop skills to be used in ensuing writing . . . something more than discussing general ideas and jotting notes is necessary” (248). Punk didn’t discard prewrites, jotted notes, general ideas—it lived off them (in the same way, *CCC* today suffers for having cleared out all the kooky trash—workshop reports, staffroom interchanges, poems, and jeux d’esprit—that makes reading back issues such a lively experience). Composition would reshape rawness out of its insistence on the salvific: we are a *helping* discipline, saving students from their less-than-perfect tongues, affording them access to the privilege and power of SWE. Bizzell spoke for many at the time when she framed our students’ problem: they “are socialized in language use much more through watching television than through reading and writing in academic discourse” (“Ethos” 351). Our transmutative language project in the post-Happenings era shifted to academic empowerment, ridding the student-expressive of all traces of the popular so as to ensure postsecondary success and, hence, full access to post-collegiate capital (as Kampf so acutely foresaw it, “train[ing] students for a world in which they will cut each others’ throats for their daily bread” [249]). Needless to say, this is not a Punk notion (“Is this writing?” Public Image Ltd. might have asked, “We’ve been careering” [*Metal Box*]). Why train students for the future when there is no future? Why give them career-oriented writing lessons when career opportunities are the ones that never knock? Punk is not a helping discipline; it doesn’t want to reform, but rather to re-form. Like Bizzell, we saw our late-1970s students as pretty vacant and hated it, pitied them. We wanted them to worry about their (our) writing. But Punk students didn’t want our pity (or our writing);

they were well beyond being pitied in their feelings. In terms of what counts as Composition, they would care only about the unforeseen possibilities of writing, the process, the play. Any concern for them was returned as accusation:

You won't find me just staying static
 Don't give me any orders
 To people like me there is no order
 Bet you thought you had it all worked out
 Bet you thought you knew what I was about
 Bet you thought you'd solved all your problems
 But you are the problem . . .
 The problem is you
 What you gonna do with your problem? ("Problems")

We never thought the problem was us; Comp 1977's Lamberg blithely writes of "Major Problems in Doing Academic Writing," and none of the problems are located in the genre or the teacher; they all lie with the students' imperfect mastery, their "lack of self-management skills . . . failure to follow instructions" (26). Even for Britton et al., the problem was that *other* way of teaching, not their own *right* way. Punk, then, acts as a permanent dark-mirror, reflecting back, while at the same time denying, everything we claim. Punk can disgust, sure, but so can we. Even at its most repellent, Punk threw unavoidable questions right back. When Johnny Rotten sang "I'm an abortion," on stage at Winterland, he turned to the audience and dead-panned: "What does that make you?" (Savage 458). No matter how airtight our cynical read of students, Punk's abrasive noise keeps pestering its way in: "You thought that we were faking, that we were all just money-making. You do not believe we're for real, or you would lose your cheap appeal" ("E. M. I."). And Punk, of course, *was* there in Composition 1977. It was present as what leaked out of the system: "It was what your teachers would call you," notes Punk fanzine writer Legs McNeil. "It meant that you were the lowest. . . . We'd been told all our lives that we'd never amount to anything. We're the people who fell through the cracks of the educational system" (Savage 131).

What fell through the cracks became Punk's aesthetic material. Punk knew a refuse lot in the city beat out all the shopping schemes in the world: "'We deal in junk, you know,' said Joe Strummer, 'what we've got is what other people have put in the rubbish bin'" (Savage 235). Punk

zines weren't worried about the surface look, just the general ideas. All you needed was knowledge of what your favorite bands, songs, and clothes were—how exciting a life they allowed you to construct out of them. And when Punk composed with official materials, it was always ironically inflected. The art of Jamie Reid, the Pistols' graphic designer, shows that Punk's aesthetic was that of the cut-up, remaking/remodeling the materials of the dominant culture, detourning them from their bland, deadening use into something truly useful. It was a re-fetishization of society's fetishes. Take the official photo of the Queen's Jubilee: only after messing with it—putting the Pistols' logo over the eyes and pasting a safety pin across her mouth (an idea Reid plagiarized from a May 1968 French poster)—could it really signify. (Debord: "We could expect nothing of anything we had not ourselves altered" [31].) This is the Happenings aesthetic, as well: looking upon past works materially, strategically, not with hushed veneration. Cage offers a pedagogical tenet in this regard: "I would not present things from the past, but I would approach them as materials available to something else which we were going to do now" (Kirby and Schechner 54). The grammar of material detournement practiced by Reid was also favored by European Happenings artist Wolf Vostell. According to Berghaus,

Vostell confronted the spectator with fragments of reality that had been reorganized according to the principles of collage, montage, assemblage, and décollage. The usual continuity of space and time was interrupted, just as modern life is discontinuous and fragmented. He broke through the normal context of the well-known, the habitual, the familiar. Elements of everyday existence were put into a new order so that the ordinary and commonplace assumed a new and strange face. This provoked spectators to take a fresh look at things. It pulled them out of their lethargy and passivity, mobilized their fantasy, and forced them to react creatively with their environment. (319–320)

Vostell's early art, the dé-coll/ages, were amalgams of ripped, weathered posters from the street. Very Punk, that: trying to find beauty from shards of society's (particularly the media's) rotting excess. And just as Kaprow had claimed for Jackson, the space of art went from the wall into the street: Vostell's dé-coll/ages gave way to dé-coll/age Actions. His early Action, *The Theatre Takes Place on the Street* (1958)—in which a group of people were directed to walk down a street and read the text fragments they found on torn posters, using body language to interpret them; tearing the already torn posters even further to expose covered

layers or suppressed media text, creating a catalogue-text of handbill detritus—was designed to stop a traffic line in the participants' lives; as Berghaus writes, "The participants were able to go beyond the level of contemplating a work of art to reflect critically on themselves and their relationship to reality by being involved in a change of their environment" (321).

The Queen's Jubilee poster, then, was only *materially* interesting for Punk. Post-Happenings Composition revered the past as art, and so became concerned with reproducing it, with writing as an iterative gesture, free of irony; an unconscious dynamic of repetition, blithely unconcerned with whether the forms it advocated were the right ones to re-cycle in terms of human need and desire. Hillocks, for example, writing in 1986, determines "the most effective mode of instruction" to be

activities which result in high levels of student interaction concerning particular problems parallel to those they encounter in certain kinds of writing, e.g., generating criteria and examples to develop extended definitions of concepts or generating arguable assertions from appropriate data and predicting and countering opposing arguments. . . . [It] places priority on structured problem-solving activities, with clear objectives, planned to enable students to deal with similar problems in composing. (247)

It became writing as a way to activate the codified scripts of academia, those similar problems in composing (and so Bizzell's call for a "taxonomy of academic discourse" ["Ethos" 355]). The search for intelligible structures is over; the goods have been found and now they need only be routinely delivered. Punk wanted the only-too-conscious repetition, the last repetition, using it all up so it could never be used again. The goods were unpacked, found revolting, and then fucked with. Rather than a taxonomy of discourse, it preferred a pastiche (e.g., Punk fashions were a melange of looks from an assortment of trends, the jumble sale aesthetic). In 1946, in his pre-bicentennial ballad "The Great Trouble with Art in This Country," Duchamp—the "original" Punk, the one who painted a mustache on the Mona Lisa and entered a urinal in an art show—articulated his boredom with composition as he knew it, and it was precisely with art as perfected repetition. He wanted not the ongoing, unified academic narrative of a tradition steadily unfolding, but rupture, an historical-material detournement such as punks practiced in their re-fetishization. His comments explain not only his own artistic strategies, but the Punk boredom with, say, the Rolling Stones:

there is no spirit of revolt—no new ideas appearing among the younger artists. They are following along the paths beaten out by their predecessors, trying to do better what their predecessors have already done. In art there is no such thing as perfection. And a creative lull occurs always when artists of a period are satisfied to pick up a predecessor's work where he dropped it and attempt to continue what he was doing. When on the other hand you pick up something from an earlier period and adapt it to your own work an approach can be creative. The result is not new; but it is new inasmuch as it is a different approach. (123)

About twenty years later, Macrorie would feel a similar dissatisfaction with Academic Composition as he knew it, also desiring irruption: "I should have realized that a cataclysmic event was needed to break a student away from the dead language of the schools—some severe displacement or removal from the unreal world of the university, like drunkenness" (*Uptaught* 11). And ten years after Macrorie, came Rotten: "I'm watching all the rubbish, you're wasting my time. I look around your house, you've got nothing to steal" ("No Feelings"). This is precisely the spirit of the Happenings, whose artists spoke of boredom matter-of-factly. Asked why he preferred Happenings to traditional theatre, Robert Whitman was frank about how little the mainstream theatrical culture offered in terms of interest or usefulness: "I've seen it all before. I haven't read a modern play that has anything to do with what I think is interesting, exciting, or meaningful in my life. They just haven't been pertinent to the problems I face" (*Kostelanetz Theatre* 234).

Unlike Composition's, Punk's performance was not judged according to standard criteria: "Whether they were *good* or not was irrelevant,' says [a fan who watched the first Sex Pistols gig in late 1975]: 'I *wanted* to be excited and they filled a spot.' [Punk p]erformers are only as interesting as the emotions that they generate, or the situations that they catalyse" (Savage 142). A focus on 'error,' for example, was anathema. Lydon could be talking about mainstream Composition instead of boring rock bands when he speaks of the folly of focusing on surface perfection instead of the bold energy of the statement:

We had to learn our skills from a live perspective. It wouldn't have worked any other way. That's what was wrong with most of those bands then—and still is. They were too much into the perfection of it all. . . . We had something none of [those] people had—energy and sheer, brazen honesty. We

couldn't give a fuck what people thought because we felt what we were saying was much more relevant. (94)

The key genres of Punk are those which made sense only when written in large letters on the media of collective space—fashion, graffiti, music, crime (these, of course, are the same discursive-sites as the negation-soundtrack of today, gangsta rap). *CCC* 1977 chose more exclusive, insular media. The social became simply a representational trope. Instead of stimulating situations, it simulated them; rather than scene, there's scenario, case. Hairston shows how to begin the fictification, explaining the way to achieve a rhetorical effect as if it were assumed the reader knew what s/he wanted, just not how to reproduce it: "Begin by asking these questions . . . Who is my audience and what assumptions can I make about them?" (2nd ed. 2). The Sex Pistols were just the opposite: "Don't know what I want but I know how to get it" ("Anarchy in the U.K."). Teachers at that open meeting in 1974 wanted improved writing instruction, perhaps, because they found, as Macrorie, Kampf, and Co. had, that the academy has an incredible propensity for turning something—a good idea, compelling material, an interesting medium, a student's life—into nothing. Punk, however, has the uncanny ability to turn absolute nothing into something amazing:

In the United States, primitive enclaves had formed across the country (nightclubs, fanzines, record stores, a half-dozen high school students here, a trio of artists there, a girl locked in her room staring at her new haircut in the mirror)—though perhaps less in response to the thrill of hearing \$10 import copies of the banned "Anarchy" single than to newspaper and TV features about London teenagers mutilating their faces with common household objects. Real discoveries were taking place, out of nothing ("The original scene," said a founder of the Los Angeles punk milieu, "was made of people who were taking chances and operating on obscure fragments of information"); for some, those discoveries, a new way of walking and a new way of talking, would dramatize the contradictions of everyday existence for years to come, would keep life more interesting than it would have otherwise been. (Marcus *Lipstick Traces* 36–37)

Punk just couldn't be represented in the narrative of *CCC* 1979, not like the Beatles or "Eve of Destruction" were in *CCC* 1969. Despite the title of Barry McGuire's hit, he wasn't rooting for the end of the world, he was dreading it ("Can't ya feel the fears I'm feelin' today? . . . Take a look around you boy, it's bound to scare ya' boy" [Kroeger 338]). And

Beatles music was appealing because it was a way to keep alive the myth “. . . that the system worked, that the class system wasn’t as repressive as some critics contended. It also proved that ‘art’ and the attitudes fostered in English art schools could produce ‘higher’ values, enabling a working-class lad to rise above his common station and the grim reality of his childhood background” (Graham 103). So Steven Carter sells *CCC* 1969 readers on the Beatles by citing accolades from Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, Ned Rorem, and Wilfred Sheed, and reinforces the high/low dichotomy by assuring that “young people grow into the Beatles as they are growing out of the wasteland of popular music—the top forty—which the Beatles have transcended” (229). Punk, as toxic-wasteland, didn’t care about the high/low, tempered/raw dichotomy: Rhetoric of the Open Hand vs. the Closed Fist? How about the Rhetoric of the Middle Finger? The Sex Pistols sang about “no future” as if they’d discovered the most wonderful thing in the world—its ending. *CCC* 1979 couldn’t allow Punk in because it would negate *CCC* 1979 and all the Composition it was attempting to prefigure, where discipline-based discursive patterns are rehearsed and reinforced. How could late Seventies *CCC* permit “Don’t be told what you want, Don’t be told what you need” (“Anarchy in the U.K.”), when that’s what we were all about doing? We were hyping our objective body of material as what students needed to succeed in college as well as the professions, but Punk, meanwhile, was taunting, “You won’t find me working nine to five. It’s too much fun being alive” (“Problems”). Punk wanted the world of the Paris Commune, a world that desired to “forever erase the divisions of faith, work, family, and leisure” (Marcus *Lipstick Traces* 141). The Commune’s is a palimpsest as indelible as Punk’s:

The Commune was the biggest festival of the nineteenth century. Underlying the events of that spring of 1871, one can see the insurgents’ feeling that they had become masters of their own history, not so much on the level of “governmental” politics as on the level of their everyday life. . . . [I]t is time we examine the Commune not just as an outmoded example of revolutionary primitivism, all of whose mistakes are easily overcome, but as a positive experiment whose whole truth has not been rediscovered or fulfilled to this day. (Debord et al. 314–315)

Think of all those Eighties *CCC* pieces about how writing on the job worked. Will knowing how a biologist writes help bring about the Paris Commune? Ah, but what about how a biologist drinks, dreams, envies?

The sweet, cracked desire to explore lives and possibilities marked the re-emergence of CCC 1968; as Deemer put it, that “reengagement of the heart, a new tuning of *all* the senses. Taking the first step toward poetry” (125). This meant hearing the unheard of, permitting any material that might afford that poetry. Marcus:

Punk to me was a form of free speech. It was a moment when suddenly all kinds of strange voices that no reasonable person could have ever expected to hear in public were being heard all over the place. . . . [I]t was the Sex Pistols who gave people permission to say anything—I mean, if this ugly, hunched-over kid could stand up and say, “I am the Anti-Christ” and make it believable, then anything was possible. (“Punk and History” 231)

Punk, then, echoes May 1968 in Paris, when “the country stopped, and suddenly everybody began to talk. . . . For a month everybody spoke to everybody else. You could talk about anything. People who had never stood up in front of more than two people, were standing up in front of thousands; fifteen-year-old girls, seventy-year-old men were trying to talk, haltingly, but in sometimes very eloquent ways, about how they wanted to live” (Marcus in “Punk and History” 232).

I don't mean to romanticize Punk, but rather to heuristicize it, to trace what I feel is its most useful, essential thread. Of course, Punk could genuinely repulse. Sid Vicious was in many respects pathetic; but pathetic people can be interesting, especially when they wield negation, which can turn their bullshit into an ethos. The hope, of course, is that negation under the politics of boredom will find no real reason to corrode what's interesting (is, say, John Coltrane, in any way the enemy?). The destructive urge goes beyond morality, ideology, aestheticism or experimentation, but when welded to the politics of boredom, one expects constructive destruction. “When we hit San Francisco . . . Sid was just into chaos for the sheer hell of it. Destroy everything. That's well and fine, but you don't destroy things offhand and flippantly. You've got to offer something in its place” (Lydon 261). Punk's famous battle cry, then—“I can't stand listening to this junk any longer!”—is presumed to result in more interesting junk. Was Punk politically suspect? *Fronts* attract obsessives, especially apocalyptic *fronts* designed to change the world. The local politics at punk clubs, for example, could be violent, awful. But the larger national politics in England at the time, the system Punk tried to undo, were worse. Punk racist? A case could probably be made. (Is a

naive rhetoric of anti-racism ultimately guilty of racism? “[As was] pointed out at the time, ‘[Punk’s] use of terms like rats, scum, plague, vermin, disease make racists appear inhuman, outside society and history.’ This rhetoric of impurity exactly paralleled that of the fascists themselves” [Savage 518]), but the charge can certainly be brought immediately to bear against Margaret Thatcher, who mused in a TV interview, “People are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture” (Savage 480). Insight into Punk’s politics can be found, as usual, in the sign system that crucially signified for Punk, its clothing, especially the tee-shirts. Punks wore their politics on their chests as well as their sleeves (those swastika armbands). Charges of Punk’s homophobia must deal with the conscious gay aesthetic of Punk: e.g., the tee-shirt McLaren sold on which two cowboys, one adjusting the other’s bandanna, both naked from the waist down, penises just barely not touching, have the following exchange:

Ello Joe, Been anywhere lately?
 Nah, its all played aht Bill,
 Gettin to straight. (Savage 101)

“There’s too many closets,” sang the Pistols (“Holidays in the Sun”), whose very name traced a homoerotic fantasy: “It came about from the idea of a pistol, a pin-up, a young thing, a better-looking assassin, a Sex Pistol” (McLaren “Punk and History” 225). Misogyny? Then you need to factor in things like the Sex tee-shirt of a woman’s breasts, which afforded males an instant trans-gender opportunity; as well as the countless women drawn to Punk, on stage, in the music press, and in the audience (according to music journalist Caroline Coon: “The punk movement was the first time that women played an equal role as partners in a subcultural group” [Lydon 72]. And musician Chrissie Hynde recalls: “The beauty of the punk thing was that from January to June of 1977, nondiscrimination was what it was all about. There was little or no sexism or racism” [Lydon 153]). Finally, to determine Punk’s politics, we might consider McLaren’s 1974 manifesto tee-shirt, emblazoned with the legend “You’re gonna wake up one morning and *know* what side of the bed you’ve been lying on!”, listing below all the hates and loves of the movement coalescing around 430 King’s Road. The entries show that Punk ideology described fairly traditional far-left politics—hates included dull rockers (of course), as well as liberals, media

monopolies, the racist National Front, lousy politicians, and all who “profit by bad housing”; loves included not only proto-Punks like Iggy and black musicians like Trane, Shepp, and Marley, but Alexander Cockburn, Lenny Bruce, Joe Orton, anti-capitalist articles in *The New Statesman*, and even Walt Whitman (Savage 84–85).

McLaren was an ethnographer of the situationists and May 1968. So the slogans, the spectacle, detournement—all became the stock strategies of Punk. As did the ideology (which might as well have been Louis Kampf’s):

The radical critique and free reconstruction of all values and patterns of behavior imposed by alienated reality are its maximum program, and free creativity in the construction of all moments and events of life is the only *poetry* it can acknowledge, the poetry made by all, the beginning of the revolutionary festival. . . . *Play* is the ultimate principle of this festival, and the only rules it can recognize are to live without dead time and to enjoy without restraints. (“On the Poverty” 337)

To ensure no dead time, Punks would use *informe*, in the form of their corrosive spit—a precious Punk fluid (Bataille: “The formless . . . serves to bring things down in the world . . . [it] amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit” [*Visions of Excess* 31])—to break down the institutions which prevented the carnival. The Pistols rallied their generation when they announced “you’ll always find us out to lunch” (“Pretty Vacant”): they were vacant only in society’s (hollow) eyes, in reality they were plotting their Permanent Mental Health Day. For Happenings Composition, the academy was a key institution needing as much spit as one could gob to bring it completely down: “Ultimately,” Lutz realized, “Freshman English as a Happening calls for the complete restructuring of the university” (35). May 1968’s short and sweet academic critique could be read in situationist graffiti: ABOLISH THE UNIVERSITY. Despite its purported nimbus of helping students, situationists saw the academy acting only to perfect itself: “they fall back into professorial morality . . . through a real rationalization of the teaching system. . . . The university has become an institutional organization of ignorance; ‘high culture’ itself is being degraded in the assembly-line production of professors, *all* of whom are cretins and most of whom would get the bird from any audience of high schoolers” (“On the Poverty” 320). Macrorie confirmed that assembly-line’s potency: “I was beginning my teaching, and, naturally enough, developing a protective

blindness" (*Uptaught* 11). The academic system left the student a bored, ignorant spectator: "The whole of his life is out of his control, the whole of *life* is beyond him. . . . [H]e parades his very ordinary ignorance as if it were an original 'lifestyle'; he makes a virtue of his shabbiness and affects to be a bohemian" ("On the Poverty" 322). Foucault, in 1971, saw the sham: "The student is put outside of society, on a campus. . . while being transmitted a knowledge traditional in nature, obsolete, 'academic' and not directly tied to the needs and problems of today. . . [there's] this kind of artificial, theatrical society, a society of cardboard, that is being built around him" (65). Or as the Sex Pistols sneered, "cheap dialog, cheap essential scenery" ("Holidays in the Sun"). No wonder, then, the Pistols' worst audiences were university students, parading their ignorance by sitting on their hands at some of the most interesting performance events in history: "It was excellent fun to confront an audience and watch them just stare. The best gigs we'd ever done was when the audience didn't even bother to clap. Those gigs were usually at the universities. Outside of the universities, you'd find that people were a bit more understanding. Isn't that odd? Our worst enemies were university students" (Lydon 87).

CCC 1977 cast out rock 'n' roll, preferring the high road of discipline, mastery, intelligible structure. *CCC 1977*, then, means *no fun*. According to Patti Smith: "Rock's creed is fun. Fun forms the basis of its apocalyptic protest. . . . The work ethic produced the A-bomb. It must be abandoned" (Graham 87). The new class that developed in the 1950s, the teenager, was meant to consume, not produce. Its fun was in large part erotic, "not connected to reproduction . . . mocking parents' belief in sexual repression, marriage, and work as necessary for salvation" (Graham 86). The turn from *CCC Late Sixties* to *CCC Late Seventies* can be traced in the choices made: the work ethic over leisure, production over consumption, the reproductive over the erotic, the salvific over the diabolic, the positive over the negative, the individualistic over the collective, the representational over the expressive, the professional over the amateur, the past over the contemporary, resolution over conflict, appreciation over disgust, and integration into cultural systems over their disruption. Stephen North worried in *CCC 1978* about the whole enterprise—"the broad absurdity of the whole thing . . . it's rather like lying on your back in the backyard on a clear summer night and calling that astronomy" ("Composition Now" 178). Exactly! Punk pedagogy was DIY. One of the Pistols' crowd, Debbie Wilson, affirms the virtues of the

anti-academic, "I was still finding my way. I don't think anybody really knows their way with clothes at fifteen. We created the style by not being educated about dress" (Savage 207). Lydon agrees: "You don't need to be technically proficient at your so-called art to write songs. If you are musically proficient, usually you won't be any good at writing songs because you won't be able to express your feelings. You'll be bogged down in the technology of note perfections, set patterns, and set ideas" (230). Punk found the best educational theory scrawled on a Paris wall: "*Prenez vos desirs pour réalité*," or embroidered on the shirt of some megalomaniac entrepreneur from King's Road: "BE REASONABLE. DEMAND THE IMPOSSIBLE." In this topsy-turvy pedagogy, "to succeed in conventional terms meant you had failed on your own terms" (Savage 140). CCC 1977 went on to discover successful writing, the way, the process, the cognitive key to righting writing. Its dream was a time when "Lord God have mercy/ All crimes are paid" ("God Save the Queen"). Punk's key to righting things? Take your pick: "How many ways to get what you want/ I use the best/ I use the rest/ I use the enemy/ I use anarchy" ("Anarchy in the U.K."). To re-festishize the swastika armband was a way to force an interruption, one which might provide a space to wonder whether Punk was only articulating a more general inchoate social reality; to wear a bondage suit in public was simply to bring sexual repression to the surface; to "give a wrong time, stop a traffic line" might allow one a delay to reflect whether one's future dream really did amount to no more than a shopping scheme. When McLaren was asked on a TV interview why the Pistols were so sick, he answered they had to seem sick, "people are sick everywhere; people are sick and fed up with this country telling them what to do" (Sex Pistols *We've Cum*).

Listening to Punk was only "a *preliminary* stage" (Graham 103), it was music you listened to in order to take further action, records to play *en route* to the ultimate rejection of records, in favor of making one's own music. We never taught that, we never taught writing as a way of hating writing (except people like Kampf). Ours was a passive curriculum of music appreciation. It was a way of purifying writing, loving writing; the simple, unconscious art of the fetish. Punk Composition doesn't care about perfection—where there's no sense, how can there be error?—it's interested in *passages*, "teenagers chang[ing] their lives in pop acts of transformation" (Savage 192). So Allan Kaprow, for example, is ultimately not Punk. He didn't want his Happenings to bring about an end to theatre (the way, say, Duchamp wanted to make paintings that would put an end

to painting); he was more 'big tent' than replacement: "I think of theatre in broader terms than most theatre people. This doesn't mean that the traditional theatre of the last few hundred years has to be moved out. Let's just add to it. . . . I don't want to put anyone out of business" (Schechner "Extensions" 229). European Happenings, born out of a strong social malaise, were far more Punk, and doubtless obvious precursors to it. Jean-Jacques Lebel describes those post-Pollock days of European anomie:

All that was left of "action painting" was action. We were determined to become one with our hallucinations. We had a feeling of apocalypse, an insuperable disgust with the "civilization of happiness" and its Hiroshimas. Everything which had not become irremediably meaningless revolved—and still revolves—round two poles: Eros and Thanatos. It is a question of giving form to the myths which are ours, while falling prey as little as possible to the alienating mechanisms of the image-making industry. (272)

So part of both the European tradition of the Happenings as well as its later manifestation in Punk is the tradition of the spectacular-poetic political protest. To get to Johnny Rotten spitting, as Marcus's *Lipstick Traces* shows, we need to start, at least, at the Paris Commune, move through the barricades, and down to (as Lebel notes) Hans Arp blowing his nose in the French flag and Jean Duprey pissing on (and, hence, extinguishing) the eternal flame at the Arc de Triomphe. "In spite of everything, an art which does not face up to the principle of reality is one which has agreed to cheat, to compromise, to go down on its knees" (Lebel 272). And in Japan at the time, there was the guerilla theatre group Zenkaguren, who specialized in fashioning loosely-sealed cellophane bags of shit—called "truth grenades"—which they would lob at the police. Lebel definitely caught their spirit:

It's time for mass shit-ins. Hit the impeccably toilet-trained "adult" civilization where it hurts—in its heavenly cleanliness. The sooner everyone realizes that

ART IS \$HIT

the better. From then on, it's pure spontaneity. (283–284)

Rather than analyzing or improving some horrid aspect of the culture, punks knew it was often just simpler to gob spit (or lob shit) at it: "A lot of people feel the Sex Pistols were just negative. I agree, and what the fuck is wrong with that? Sometimes the absolute most positive thing you can be in a boring society is completely negative. It helps" (Lydon 77). Take Wolf Vostell's very Punk Happening *No-Nine dé-coll/ages*

(1963), which performs, let us say, the ultimate analysis of televisual media. Where a post-Happenings cultural-studies curriculum might use a nice, tidy, theory-based, ad analysis to “deconstruct” media representation, Vostell took a different, more direct route: “After being driven to a quarry where Vostell had set up a TV set, the audience settled down to watch a popular quiz show which Vostell, from the upper part of the quarry, constantly jammed or ‘décollaged.’ Finally, he blew up the television” (Berghaus 323). At a later festival in 1963, in New Jersey, he buried a TV. This is the difference between Composition’s official attitude of cannily deciphering and critiquing systems of cultural representation and Punk’s ultimate response, which figures “why bother?” The system deserves no more than to be fucked with, blown up, and then—if you’re feeling generous—buried. Anything more would legitimize it, encourage it. Vostell, in fact, purposefully noted his distinct difference from Kaprow. In an “action lecture” the two of them gave in New York, in 1964, Vostell saw his goal as *informe*, the opposite of Kaprow’s sunnier expansiveness: his interest, he stated was “decomposition of the life principles that surround us, whilst you [Kaprow] . . . build up and construct” (Berghaus 324).

We can see the Punk/Happenings connection in Fluxus founder George Maciunas’s 1962 manifesto “Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art.” In this essay, Maciunas champions what he terms a concretist notion of art, implying “unity of form and content, rather than their separation . . . the world of concrete reality rather than the artificial abstraction of illusionism” (156). He wants to return to an art of material reality, and so even the sound of a piano becomes illusionistic, as opposed to the more materially concrete sound “produced by striking the same piano itself with a hammer or kicking its underside,” a sound “more material and concrete since it indicates in a much clearer manner the hardness of hammer, hollowness of piano sound box and resonance of string” (157). Take proto-Punk Pete Townsend’s guitar-destroying finales to his concerts with the Who, acknowledged by Townsend to be influenced by Fluxus artist Gustav Metzger’s 1962 lecture at Townsend’s art school. Or Nam June Paik’s *One for Violin Solo* (1962), which consisted of him destroying a violin, a performance termed “action music” (Smith “Fluxus” 26). Paik’s piece went utterly counter to traditional concert-hall aesthetics, which, by fetishizing the violin, abstract it from basic humanity. Stiles writes, “Paik’s performance visualizes how oppressive elite cultural ‘art’ objects may be when their affective presence is over-determined against the value of

human presence. Fluxus performances in general resoundingly support human presence and enactment over the *in-itselfness* of objects or the ‘affective presence’ of fine art” (85). Punk was desperate to return to a human presence, suffocating rubber bondage shirts worn on stage and safety pins stuck into bodies became a constant reminder of the body as baseline. To achieve concretism, Maciunas put forth the very Punk concept of art-nihilism or anti-art. The anti-art-forms he advocated read very much like Bataille’s *informe*, and would seem to burn off the simulation of affective presence and bring about a desired re-connection with the human-scaled real:

The “anti-art” forms are directed primarily against art as a profession, against the artificial separation of a performer from audience, or creator and spectator, or life and art; it is against the artificial forms or patterns or methods of art itself; it is against the purposefulness, formfulness and meaningfulness of art; anti-art is life, is nature, is true reality—it is one and all. Rainfall is anti-art, a babble of a crowd is anti-art, a flight of a butterfly, or movements of microbes are anti-art. They are as beautiful and worth to be aware of as art itself. (157)

Both Punk and the Happenings realized the interdependence of creation and destruction. Vostell first used *décoll/age* to name his Happenings when he read the term used in 1954 by *Le Figaro*, to describe the take-off and immediate crash of an airliner. And Jackson, of course. The drip paintings are nothing if not Punk:

Perhaps initially Pollock was expressing, acting out, the tension between his frustrations and his rebelliousness by spilling paint. Perhaps he wanted to destroy the entire history of painting and to start fresh, screaming now, as during much of his life, “Fuck you,” screaming this at the world, at history, with the most intensely positive and negative meaning, simultaneously loving and angry. . . . Like a naughty boy, Pollock may have wanted to make a mess, to disturb everything neat and orderly and faceless about the canvas, its clean surface, its regular texture, its rectangular shape, all reminiscent of dining tables he’d cleared and cleaned as a child and at the League, of dishes he’d washed and wiped until sparkling, of laundry on the line, of shirts he’d been told to tuck in, of rules of cleanliness, rules of composition. (Friedman *Energy* 98)

English Composition as Punk would have meant English Composition as Neo-Avant-Garde, resulting in a movement away from the Modernist representational program in which it languishes, a movement seen by Foster as distinctive of vanguard contemporary arts in their “shift in

conception—from reality as an effect of representation to the real as a thing of trauma” (146). It was a natural for writing classes: when *Rolling Stone* writer Charles Young first met John Lydon in England, in the Summer of 1977, his reaction to “the idea of this sickly dwarf bringing the wrath of an entire nation down on his shoulders . . . [was that] if someone this powerless could cause that much uproar, maybe words still mean something” (73). A British Mariana Gibson might have had her students writing Queen’s Jubilee ballads in 1977. And if John Lydon had been one of her students, he’d have done brilliant. No surprise: as Gibson knew, “The more familiar the theme is, the easier it will be for students to catch the creative mood” (94). And the theme of Lydon’s Jubilee ballad, “God Save the Queen,” was very familiar to him: “As for ‘God Save the Queen,’ there’s always going to be this aristocratic segment of English society who are untouchable and unflappable. They wouldn’t know what you were talking about should you attempt to even comment on their atrocious behavior. They just don’t see it” (186). So, of course, that familiarity let him easily catch the creative mood: “I wrote ‘God Save the Queen’ at the kitchen table. . . . I wrote it one morning waiting for my baked beans to cook. I wrote the lyrics in one sitting” (81). Lydon had facility with the composing process perhaps because of a conception of his writing as exscription into life rather than solipsistically recycling a simulation: “This is how I write most of my songs. There is no set format, I tend to think a long time before I put pen to paper. When I’m ready, I’ll sit down and write it out in one long piece, more like an open letter than a song. It becomes valid confrontation. There’s an element of glory to it” (82). Lydon, then, would have provided Composition with a wonderful student-exemplar of the composing process as energy made visible. Music journalist Caroline Cook might have been speaking for a compositionist when she marveled at the freshman-aged writer’s expressive power: “I loved his talent for writing, which was a combination of nerves and ambition. Here was somebody, nineteen, writing poems. That’s what makes someone an artist. It’s what moves you” (Lydon 114).

Alas, though, no Rotten Writing in *CCC* 1977. But Punk does just barely exist in the bowels of late Seventies Composition, fleetingly, as a wispy suggestion of unfortunately underused writing material: Lunsford mentions in passing that in one of her research studies, “About half of the twenty-two basic writers’ essays . . . focused on punk rock and disco” (“Content” 283). There was a potential, then, in Punk, like Happenings Composition, that can’t be forgotten, which makes its

erasure that much harder to swallow. “It was a good time. It could have gone anywhere at one point. It kept people on edge. . . . At the end there was a pointless rerunning of a B movie, packed with the obvious. It shouldn’t have been. It could have been something very courageous, and an absolute change. And yes, we could have won” (Lydon in “Punk and History” 231).

Exploiting Punk in CCCC 1977–1980—allowing students to write against the inhibitory—would have meant teaching the Deemerian allegory “English Composition as Cabaret Voltaire”; it would have meant Composition according to “the notion that in the constructed setting of a temporally enclosed space—in this case, a [classroom]—anything could be negated. It was the notion that, there, anything might happen, which meant finally that in the world at large, transposed artistically, anything might happen there, too” (Marcus *Lipstick Traces* 241). The program of the Cabaret Voltaire sounds like something those who want literacy as social action might like to explore: “Night after night, unknown people climbed out of the crowd to speak, to recite poems they had treasured all their lives or made up a few minutes before, to sing old songs, to make fools of themselves, to take part, to change” (Marcus 212). To a curriculum like this, one that tells unknown people they can “be free, elegant, smart, independent, the owners of all that they say,” post-Happenings Composition knowingly sniffs, “sentimental realism” (Bartholomae “Writing” 70, 69). (It’s reminiscent of how Greenberg dismissed the Action Painter, as if he had “come out of nowhere and owes practically nothing to anything before him. It’s as though art began all over again every other day” [“How Art Writing” 143]). But from 1977 on, Composition was not busy converting the writing classroom into a Dadaist cabaret; rather its project was ridding the verbalscape of all traces of the carnival, erecting the classical facade of the New French Academy. There would be no abandoning of the work ethic in CCCC’s foreseen Seventies. After all, it is only to pinheads like “Mr. Little-Know and Mr. Strong-Feel [that the Academy] is likely to seem only the original school marm, and Carnival the ultimately free secular Beulah Land,” according to the trained, tempered, aware Robert B. Heilman, who wasn’t against Carnival *per se*, only when it threatened to completely restructure the university, “only when it pops up all year round in classroom, study, and library” (“Except He Come” 237).

CCC volume 29, number 1, appeared in February 1978, one month after the Sex Pistols’ gig at the Winterland, their last as a group. Just as

the Pistols were going through their own long-overdue death-throes (one observer at the concert recalled: "It was a zombie performance, people who were already dead, reanimated for a while, going through their motions. They were media-saturated, they'd run out of message to deliver" [Savage 457–458]), a similar death-rattle finally sounded in our field. In that number of *CCC*, the still-barely-animated zombie of Happenings Composition is finally brought down: Robert Connors reviews Ken Macrorie's *Vulnerable Teacher*, using the review as an opportunity to nail the coffin on the spirit of Comp 1968. He brings in enough cynical power to ensure Macrorie's death by exposure: e.g., "We are given, for the umpteenth time, the tale of his pedagogical death-rebirth experience of May 5, 1964, with its famous battle-cry, 'I can't stand reading this junk any longer!'" (108). Connors consciously casts this ideological clash as a Sixties vs. Seventies thing, just as Punk itself did—"getting rid of the albatross . . . still the spirit of '68" (Public Image Ltd. *Metal Box*); or, as the seventeen year-old Punk spat at the twenty-nine year-old hippie, "We like noise, it's our choice, it's what we wanna do. We don't care about long hair, I don't wear flares" ("Seventeen")—except Connors comes off as a kind of Anti-Punk, shaking off Sixties nonsense to get back to Heilmanian business: "The bright lamp of Sixties radicalism, which Macrorie hefted so confidently in *Uptaught* . . . has dimmed and begun to gutter in the harsher realities of the Seventies" (108). Connors ends the review with a patricidal dream-image, that of "the pragmatic Seventies hav[ing] wounded Macrorie's Panglossian humanism unto death" (109). So, Punk a part of the burgeoning of post-Happenings Composition? "Give 'Em Enough Rope" on the cover of *CCC* 1978, instead of "Travelers' Warming: A Blizzard of May Blossoms"? No way. Post-Happenings Composition was built to last, to have a permanent aesthetic and callistic form; it's part of the evolving tradition. Punk, as music, as medium, was built to self-destruct faster than snow on a robin's tail, to have the *informe* of decay and disgust. It's a gamble, of course, to refuse to reproduce old writing, to be so seized by the desire to create a new thought that one is desperate enough to try to wring meaning out of even such nothing junk as safety pins, to hope to disgorge ethereal spirit from common household objects agonizingly available to all. Formally, it's a gamble one is sure to lose.

There's an inexorability, a doom-equation at the heart of negation's drama, which results in Punk's pathetic end. Few artists—only Duchamp comes readily to mind (who called some of his texts "wrotten writtens")

[*morceaux moisis*] *vii*)—have been able to marshal enough inner resistance to continuously exploit negation for more than a matter of years. Hebdige notes that Sid and Nancy’s story “obeyed the laws of narrative[,] and inevitably, given the status of the protagonists, they remained, first and foremost, events within representation” (39). Indeed, they *are* characters—in “The Ballad of Sid and Nancy” (a cautionary tale, of course):

For naughty boys who swear and break
All boundaries and try to make
Pain out of pleasure, pleasure from pain
Look on Sidney; think again. (Hebdige 38)

The Pistols couldn’t maintain nihilism’s pitch; by the time they toured America, their negation-value was only exploitable as ad-copy hook: “They said no one could be more bizarre than Alice Cooper, or more destructive than Kiss! They’ve not seen the Sex Pistols!” was how the cornball radio commercial hyped their Dallas show (Sex Pistols *We’ve Cum*). Sid and Nancy, Hebdige continues, were “victims of their own drive to coherence, in bondage to a fantasy of absolutes in a world where they simply don’t exist” (40). Negation, in taking on everything, proves a demanding strategy, “curdl[ing] into the nullities of dogma, cynicism or self-destruction” (Savage 478). So there, on stage at San Francisco’s Winterland Ballroom, on January 14, 1978, Punk caught up with itself:

On stage, all one saw was an ugly, unlikely youth declaring his time as a pop star had come to an end: you could see it happen, hear him deciding to quit. “Ah, it’s awful,” he said in the middle of “No Fun,” his last song as a member of the Sex Pistols, even his loathing leaving him. . . . The disgust that the band had been built to talk about had finally . . . overtaken the one whose job it was to talk about it. . . . All one saw was a failure; all one saw was a medium. . . . The show had gone as far as a show can go. (Marcus *Lipstick Traces* 123)

“Ever get the feeling you’ve been cheated?” Lydon asked from the Winterland stage at the end of the Sex Pistols’ last concert. (Should that be the last question on our students’ course evaluation forms?) If Lydon’s disgust became self-realization, what about CCC’s tradition of pedagogical critique: victims of our own drive to coherence, in bondage to our own fantasy of absolutes—what do we do when we realize it’s our own pedagogy we’ve been critiquing, it’s our own body we’ve been mutilating?

Worse, and infinitely more worrisome, what if we never realize it? The Sex Pistols imploded partly because they stopped loathing the rock star system and began coveting it, re-novelizing themselves into its institutional narrative. Such is one of many contradictions at the heart of Punk: after killing rock 'n' roll, they attempt to find their identity in it. They transgressed the democratic impulse of Punk for industry elitism; as the Carnival became *played aht*, they decided to check out the Academy. The legend scrawled on Steve Jones' amp, "Guitar Hero," at some point lost all irony. That dangerous impulse—to become our worst nightmare, to forget to remember the politics of boredom—is always present in CCC. "We're all prostitutes," sang some Punk band nobody hardly remembers.

Punk in CCC 1977? Of course it was there. In fact, it was there even earlier, in the early Seventies. CCC 1968 failed, like pop at the time, to transform the world because it neglected to definitively unfinish the institution. Trimbur, for example, sees process theory's failure in its inability to escape belletrism. As the hippie era became post-, a hollow sense of ritual set in: "Style replaced content; clothing became costume" (Savage 6). The ritualistic pervaded Composition; writing-as-iteration existed only to perfect. So I close with another tale of lack and desire, the one about the scholar bored by the increasing staleness of the same old song in Composition pedagogy, reflecting back on his first semester teaching Freshman English, in 1973, and his grim realization of NO FUTURE regarding his students and his curriculum: "I knew from the first week that I was going to fail them; in fact, I knew that I was going to preside over a curriculum that spent 14 weeks slowly and inevitably demonstrating their failures" (Bartholomae "Tidy House" 5). But some abrasive sociocultural noise breaks through the otherwise bland sounds of the early Seventies for that teacher, in the form of a student paper composed of little more than boredom and spit, a sound that twenty years later this teacher still cannot get out of his head. In fact, he claims, "it was the only memorable paper that I received from that class [in 1973] and I have kept it in my file drawer for eighteen years, long after I've thrown away all my other papers from graduate school" (6). The teacher was a young graduate assistant named David Bartholomae, the student was a young . . . what? Basic Writer? Loser? Nihilist? Punk? named Quentin Pierce. The paper is a self-canceling text, a self-failing gesture. It's the auto-mutilation of the student's last frontier: the body of his own writing. "The body becomes the baseline, the place where the buck stops," Hebdige said, describing the British punks. "To wear a

mohican or to have your face tattooed, is to burn most of your bridges. In the current economic climate, when employers can afford to pick and choose, such gestures are a public disavowal of the will to queue for work, throwing yourself away before They do it for you” (32). Bartholomae dwells on the Punkish surface of Quentin’s body: “the handwriting is labored and there is much scratching out . . . crossed out sentences” (5–6). But it is, of course, the slogans contained within Quentin’s manifesto that Bartholomae cannot shake. Quentin leaves the ritual of post-hippie positivity behind to say “fuck you” to his writing teacher, his paper, his future, himself (“my entrance, my own creation, my grand finale, my goodbye” [Public Image Ltd. *Public Image*]). He injects the whole enterprise of post-Happenings Composition with instant entropy, or rather he exposes the entropic decay inherent in it through his refusal to enable the ritual further. After a few halting attempts at an answer to the ultra-academic prompt “If existence precedes essence, what is man?” his paper makes the turn for oblivion (*his ruling passion*):

Man will not survive, he is a asshole.

STOP

The stories in the books or meaningless stories and I will not elaborate on them
This paper is meaningless, just like the book. (6)

Quentin’s negation fails himself before They have a chance to:

But, I know the paper will not make it.

STOP. (6)

Bartholomae continues his still-shook reverie:

At the end, in what now begins to look like a page from *Leaves of Grass* or *Howl*, there is this:

I don’t care.

I don’t care.

about man and good and evil I don’t care about this shit fuck this shit,
trash and should be put in the trash can with this shit

Thank you very much

I lose again. (6)

Whitman or Ginsberg—maybe. But they sound even more like the lyrics of a Sex Pistols song. As Punk, Quentin’s self-negation works as *informe* to undo Bartholomae’s curricular theory: “I was not prepared for this

paper. In a sense, I did not know how to read it. I could only ignore it. I didn't know what to write on it, how to bring it into the class I was teaching" (6). Quentin, then, is the excess that our pedagogy cannot process, the poison in our human machine. But Quentin is also the flower in our dustbin, one whose seed lay not-so-dormant (*the only memorable paper*) for eighteen years until it blossomed in "The Tidy House." No need to worry, therefore, about Punk in CCCC. It's inescapable, forming a permanent theater of tension—the dominant culture vs. the underground, the academic as against the avant-garde. The pragmatic Seventies may well have wounded all Panglosses unto death, but what about the Anti-Pangloss? Punk might have imploded as a medium, as a show, but as *a state of mind*? As that, it's going nowhere. Punk's historical implosion is beside the point—I mean, big deal, the Paris Commune imploded, too: one could "easily prove that the Commune was objectively doomed to failure and could not have been fulfilled. They forget that for those who really lived it, the fulfillment *was already there*" (Debord et al. 316). The Pistols knew: "Too many people had the suss/ Too many people support us/ An unlimited amount/ Too many outlets in and out" ("E. M. I."). Punk—under whatever name—is here for the long haul, as long as modernity lasts; Lefebvre tells us, "to the degree that modernity has a meaning, it is this: it carries within itself, from the beginning, a radical negation" (Marcus *Lipstick Traces* 184). So Punk, finally, as part of the burgeoning of post-Happenings Composition? Why, it's the part we remember best.

