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4/29/2003
ARTH 3314

The Ties That Bind

“Paris, February 1968. Students strike at the Sorbonne. They demand an end to visitation rules. They also demand control over course content and the selection of new faculty members. In the streets of Paris, Molotov cocktails are heaved at the police. Students are beaten by police. 100s are injured and there were several deaths. Interestingly enough, 80% of the population of Paris supported the student protesters.”

www.historyguide.org/europe/lecture15.html

In this paper I will argue that Catalina Parra’s politics and her aesthetic came out of the 1968 cultural climate of revolt in Europe. You can also see traces of early Berlin Dadaists’ influence through her collages. This combination leads to her later dada/punk rock style. What’s unique about Parra’s work is that she stitches her materials together instead of gluing them. The stitched aspect of Parra’s work is directly connected to the punk rock stitch of the 70s; both are linked historically, aesthetically and symbolically.

Defining Terms

To be clear about what I mean by the words *stitch*, *punk*, and the *punk rock stitch*, I will define them. Henceforth in this paper, when I use the word *stitch* I mean a gesture of the hand holding a needle that pierces a surface, leaving behind a trail of thread, string, or rope. I define *punk* as the ideology of a popular music phenomenon of the late 1970s. The *punk rock stitch* is the needlework the punks used to sew their ripped up clothing back together.

Historical Context – 1968, 1977

At the same time that the punks were ripping up their clothes and sewing them back together in England in 1977, Parra was ripping up her newsprint materials and

sewing it back together in Chile. Even though they were across the Atlantic Ocean, I don't think this was a coincidence.

When Parra moved to Germany in 1968, after living in Chile for 28 years, she became a witness to the turbulence that had gripped Europe. The year 1968 has not been dubbed "The Year of the Barricades" for nothing. It was a year filled with violence and passion. There were student uprisings on college campuses and riots on the streets. A revolution was taking place against the Establishment. Students were tired of blindly accepting the ideology that was set forth by the authorities. These students were part of a New Left; a Left that believed in situationism.

Situationism came forth in the late 1950s, and, as Paul Fitzpatrick defines it, "situationists were anti-capitalist: they were against work and looked to play and spontaneity as the cornerstones necessary to modern life. As they saw it, modernity, limited work and relative abundance, city planning and welfare state produced not happiness, but depression and boredom. "...Wandering around the city, drifting without destination, neither going to work or properly consuming was a waste of time in the temporal economy, in a society where 'time is money'. In response, the situationists denounced alienation and extolled revolution, promoting their motto *Ne travzaillez jamais* (Never Work)" (<http://www.furious.com/perfect/situationism.html>). This idea of alienation and identity crisis surfaced much earlier in the mid 19th Century with the existentialists. Books like Dostoevsky's Notes from the Underground exemplify this idea of modern life leading to depression and boredom, and the struggle of finding meaning in such a lifestyle. This continuing growing awareness of the Self in and of society led up to the revolt in 1968. And it did not stop there. In 1976, The Sex Pistols, X, and The

Ramones along with other punk bands marked the beginning of the new existentialist/situationist/revolutionist generation.

The punk rock style actually started in England because people were able to get more money on welfare than by actually working. Young British kids would go to job interviews with died hair and ripped clothes, so that they wouldn't have to get a job, but get welfare instead. (Here we see clearly the situationist influence: Never Work!)

Malcolm McLaren, future Sex Pistols manager, was involved in setting up demonstrations in London in 1968. He, like Parra, was a witness to those turbulent times. Later he would recycle those slogans and put them onto T-shirts for his Kings Road SEX shop. He also helped publish a book by ex-situationist Christopher Gray called *Leaving the 20th Century*. Jamie Reid's cartoons and graphics appeared in it to give te situationist message more style. Reis later designed album covers and posters for the Sex Pistols.

McLaren also helped design the cover for *God Save the Queen*, the Sex Pistol's first full-length album. The idea originated from a Ma 1968 poster by a student "showing a young woman covered in surgical gauze and a safety pin jamming her lips closed" (<http://www.furious.com/perfect/situationism.html>).

Aesthetically

In 1977, Catalina Parra created Diariamente by ripping and tearing Chile's local newspaper "El Mercurio" apart, reconstructing the piece s and then sewing them back together. Diariamente consists of two equal horizontal sections. The bottom part shows rows upon rows of obituaries that have been sewn together. On top is an advertisement for bread; the background is black and across the top the word *diariamente* ... (daily) is typed in bold, white letters. Underneath the word *diariamente*, a loaf of bread slants in

from the left. Parra has visually wrapped the loaf in newspaper, so that it seems that the newsprint is imprinted on the bread. The five cut-off pieces of the bread on the right side have fallen toward the middle of the work, almost coming into contact with the stitches that hold together the obituaries. The advertisement has been ripped apart starting from the top center straight down the middle, where the loaf is, forming a wide gap that exposes another page from the newspaper “El Mercurio”. Through the gap, a news picture of two people is visible. She has covered up the opening with a *kodalith*, so that the image has become hard to identify. Parra has used a thick, coarse string in an attempt, or to show an attempt to sew the gap back together.

The Stitch

Craft of the stitch

A hand stitch is a reaction against modernity, technology, and the consumerism of the mass-produced. This do-it-yourself attitude was the forefront of the situationist movement (more on that later). Parra’s stitches in Diariamente have been hand sewn in a very unorganized and crude manner. They are charged with energy, passion and violence. Since this work is a response to the 1973 coup in Chile (Pinochet had staged to overthrow Allende and installed a military dictatorship), such words appropriately convey Chilean’s emotions during that time. The early years of Pinochet’s regime were the most shocking for Chileans, who had been non-violent and coup-free for several decades. The initial strike was so massive that Pinochet gained control of the government in less than a week. Thousands of people died or disappeared. The coup aimed mainly to demobilize left-wing parties and organizations by arresting their leader, and interrogating, torturing, and,

in many cases, executing them. Across the gap, the stitches show an attempt to hush up, or hide, the terror that might leak out.

Feminist Quality

The sewing craft in Parra's work turns them into feminist constructs. Women used sewing craft in the Pattern and Decoration Movement of the 1970s as a reaction to high-art and its male dominated scene. Even though Parra is concerned with the status of women in art, I think her art is also a reaction against women's role in society in general. Needlework and the Women, who engaged with needlework, have always had a kind of secrecy to them. Women sewed amongst themselves as a social gathering, at which they talked and exchanged ideas. But that tradition faded with the advancement of technology. Yet the stereotype has stayed. Women are to keep their opinions amongst themselves and in secrecy, like the needlework. Making the needlework a public statement is a reaction to that stereotype. She says she doesn't make statements, she just documents. Yet when sewing her advertisements, newspaper articles, and headlines together, the stitches become in some cases harsh, unorganized, and almost fidgety with anger, as is seen in Diariamente.

The Collage: Text + Image

When using the word collage, I mean taking mass-produced printed materials out of context, rearranging them and putting them back together in a different context. In doing so, you are forcing someone to read a mass-produced image (which is meant to only be read one way) and interpret it in a different way. Such acts rebel against the authority that formed the image to begin with. When Catalina Parra rearranges her materials, the image is dominant – the text is parasitic. Due to her Dada influence, her

text/images explode. In Diariamente, the obituaries become a blurred black and white area that becomes visually ignored. The text is parasitic to the image of the bread. The imagery is so vague (yet powerful) that she never had to worry about censorship. Actually, for Parra, using the text as an image originates on a more personal level.

Her father, Nicanor Parra, was known in Chile for his poetry and his books. The written word was everything to him. Catalina Parra grew up in a textual chaos/order. When she became an artist, she rebelled against her father's reputation. For her, the image comes first – the text is secondary. One could say that the text represents the male that has to be diminished and the image the female that grows and achieves primacy. In this context, we again see her feminist side emerge.

Punk Clothes

It all started with SEX – a shop owned by Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood in 1974. They were interested in the alternative fashions of the rising underground. Westwood was the designer of the clothes. “[She] deconstructed classic white T-shirts to its essence. She cut off the arms, ripped the shoulder seams open and knotted them back together” (www.mital-u.ch/PunkWave/westwood_e.html). Most of the shirts, skirts, dresses, and pants had that quality. The ready-made objects were ripped and torn, almost mutilated, and then crudely sewn, knotted or pinned back together. Malcolm McLaren, who was the manager of the Sex Pistols, recycled old situationist slogans and silk-screened them onto the shirts. Jackets were decorated with studs, and patches that were hand sewn on. If you look closely at Johnny Rotten's jacket, you will see the different needlework designs, the studs, the zippers and the patches that have been sewn on.

The Punk Stitch

The punk rock stitch was born there in SEX, by Vivienne Westwood, and most likely died with it. Just like in Parra's work Diariamente, the stitch is crude and filled with passion and violence – not like the cold unemotional look that the sewing machine stitches had when they arrived at SEX. The mark of technology was then ripped out and replaced by the handmade *stitch*.

Feminist Qualities?

I think for women it is very important the way they look (r do not look), to have a style. Therefore I think that this whole style of clothing that Vivienne Westwood designed is very feminist, because she was able to defile the ready-made clothes and make them her own. But not just for her, but for a whole generation. Like Parra, she put the needlework into the foreground, also reacting against the stereotype of women and needlework to stay in the background. Fashion designs are very powerful in that they became walking pieces of art, not just to be hung on a wall.

Punk Albums/Fliers

The collage aspect of Parra's works, the text versus image, surfaces in punks' album covers, zines, and fliers. For example the Sex Pistols cover for *God Save the Queen*, shows the queen's head on a round portraiture surface, with the text "God Save the Queen", which has been put together with various types and fonts cut out of magazines, across her eyes. The text "Sex Pistols", done in the same style, covers her mouth. The Sex Pistols also used the same picture of the queen, without any text, but had a safety pin holding her smiling mouth shut. Again, as I explained with Parra's work,

collage is a very rebellious act because you take things out of context and force someone to interpret it differently than it was intended to be.

Text + Image = text as image?

In these punk collages though, the text is separate and hardly parasitic in some cases. The collages are very focused on its textual message rather than the visual message. They are a lot more straightforward than Parra's works.

Symbolically

Catalina Parra takes her artistic needlework further and also transforms it into a primitive, cultural icon. When she studied the ancient Indian culture of Chile, she came across the myth of the *Imbunche*. The myth tells of a creature whose bodily orifices have been sewn shut to prevent the suspected evil from expressing itself. The creature ironically became known for its great prophecies after being silenced. Catalina Parra claims she doesn't make a statement, just like the creature. Sometimes in just documenting, keeping silent, one can make a powerful statement. Just like what happened to the *Imbunche*, she sews up her work to silence them. She makes the viewers look for their own meaning. She says,

“When they ask me what something means, I tell them to look: what does a cut mean? What does a stitch mean? What does blood mean? You know what those things mean for you. I don't.”

- (Christ 7)

Prophets like the *Imbunche* also arose in punk rock music. When I use the term prophet I mean someone through whom divine words flow. In 1977, the same year Parra made Diariamente, the Sex Pistols wrote a song called “Holidays In The Sun”. The song itself is a prophecy about the fall of the Berlin Wall.

“I had no reason to be here at all.
But now I got a reason it’s no real reason
And I’m waiting at the Berlin wall
I gotta go over the Berlin wall”

- Holidays in the sun

This song also echoes another situationist theme: “...the idea of the “vacation” as a sort of loop of alienation and domination, a symbol of the false promises of modern life, a notion that, as *Club Med- a cheap holiday in other people’s misery*, would become graffiti in Paris in May 1968” (<http://www.furious.com/perfect/situationism.html>). But the Sex Pistols were not the only ones. Exene Cervenka of X was also a prophet:

“No one is united
All things are untied
Perhaps we’re boiling over inside
They’ve been telling lies.
Who’s been telling lies?
There are no angels
There are devils in many ways
Take is like a man
The world’s a mess; it’s in my kiss”

-The World’s mess; it’s in my kiss, Album – Los Angeles

The role in society

Catalina Parra has a lot in common with the punks of the late 1970s. They both protested against their role in society, although their societies differed so much in which they lived during that time. Parra was frustrated with the role women played in society and in the art world. The British Punks were frustrated with the role they played in the society they lived in. Instead of fighting for their role, they were protesting the society itself. The identity crisis in existentialism has turned into a society crisis. A local Houston punk band called The Hates, which have been around since the late 1970s explain:

“Mass-production, self-destruction, synthetic, surrogated
assimilated into a brand!
Corporate corruption, fixed-elections, ecological disruption,
Gurus getting rich off our land!
Arms race escalation, industrial obsolescence
Farmers’ credit getting out-of-hand!
Society Crisis!”

-Society Crisis, Greatest Hates

In conclusion, a simple hand-made stitch has made its way from being an uninteresting, needed clothing material to a rebellious act, both in art and in fashion. I think it is hardly a coincidence that the stitch in Parra’s works and in punk fashion is the same. The link between the two is Malcolm McLaren. Both him and Parra were involved in the 1968 student uprisings, and even though they moved to the opposite side of the Atlantic Ocean, this time period influenced both aesthetically. For McLaren it was the SEX shop; for Parra, her collages.

Annotated Bibliography

1. Herzberg, Julia P. 1992. Catalina Parra in Retrospect. New York.:Lehman College Art Gallery

This book gives detailed chronological description of Catalina Parra's life and how it affected her works. It is written from the "outside", giving us straightforward facts and Herzberg's analyses of Parra's works.
2. Christ, Ronald. 1981. Catalina Parra and the meaning of materials. *ArtsCanada* 38 (March/April): 1981

This article also gives a detailed description of Catalina Parra's life. Since it is based on an interview Ronald Christ did with Catalina Parra, it has a lot more personal reaction on Catalina Parra's part of the works.
3. Broude, Norma., Mary D. Gerrard. 1996. The Power of Feminist Art. New York.:Harry N. Abrams, Inc.

This book gave me a detailed description of the Feminist movement in art; how and why it came to be, and who were the key figures. I mainly focused on the chapter about The Pattern and Decoration Movement. It gave me much information on the significance of needlework in Art that I could relate to Catalina Parra's work. Reading analyses of needlework pieces by other artists, brought up some comparisons and contrasts to Parra's work, which furthered my analysis of her work.
4. <http://www.historyguide.org/europe/lecture15.html>

This document is a written lecture by Steven Kreis about the year 1968. He discusses the leading up to the uprisings, and the creation of the New Left. He

mainly focuses on the youth that took part in the revolution, who they were, why they revolted, and against what.

5. <http://www.furious.com/perfect/situationsim.html>

This document is a compilation of information about situationism and Rock written by Paul Fitzpatrick. He gives a lot of historical info, how situationism started, then moves on to what their ideas/values were, then connects it with the 1968 revolts in Europe, and later also uses Malcolm McLaren to link all this to the Sex pistols and the punk style. He continues weaving this thread into the 80s and 90s with Factory Records, later Hacienda, and their bands like Joy Division.

6. http://www.mital-u.ch/PunkWave/westwood_e.html

This document gives historical information about Vivienne Westwood's first 40 years. It tells us how she got to know Malcolm McLaren, how SEX got started, and who, or what, her influences were.

7. http://www.cwd.co.uk/391/manifestos/tristantzara_dadamaniesto.htm

This site features a copy of Tristan Tzara's 1916 manifesto.

Selected Images

1. Catalina Parra "Diariamente", 1977, newspaper, thread, transparent paper, 28"x22"
2. <http://music.lycos.com/pictures/fullimage.asp?QW=Sex%20Pistols>
3. <http://www.comnet.ca/~rina/fashion.html>
4. <http://www.musicomh.com/singles/sex-pistols.htm>
5. <http://www.greatmodernpictures.com/newpage4.htm>

6. <http://www.musicomh.com/singles/sex-pistols.htm>