

# kill your idols

Honesty, contradiction, and violence in music and architecture, and youth culture as the new *old order*

by Juan Obando

## ***THEN: ROCK SAVED THE QUEEN***

“Less is more is a smokescreen”

- Rem Koolhaas (Content, 2003)

**By 1978 punk had become a parody of itself**, a commercial formula that proved a rejuvenating shot into the old record industry that punk had hoped to overthrow and a safe image that helped the cultural industry alienate an entire generation of young consumers into believing rebellion was a record, a guitar, a leather jacket or a pair of jeans. During that year, the Sex Pistols, the ultimate punk act of all time, toured America for the first and last time, confirming a feeling that had been around for quite long: They were bored.

The Sex Pistols emerged as a band in 1976 in London, England. The whole country was confused, the Labor Party had promised radical changes in favor of the working class after the war, but nothing was happening. Unemployment, social chaos, riots, strikes, and piles of garbage invaded the cityscape. People were fed up with the old way; the *old* way was clearly not working. Music was the tool that the four members of the band (all of them coming from working-class families) chose to deal with this discontent. Barely knowing how to play their own instruments, Paul Cook, Glenn Matlock, Steve Jones, and John Lydon (AKA “Johnny Rotten”) were united under the name “The Sex Pistols” by English impresario and founder of the store SEX, Malcolm McLaren (now the band manager), to form a new type of rock and roll band that would revolutionize music by deleting any musical ornament from their compositions and by

embracing the rawest, most basic elements of rock music into their presentation, an antidote to the *old*.

The Pistols saw themselves as “the most honest thing that has ever been played” and presented themselves in a way they thought showed the reality of the English environment at the time. “I would wrap myself basically in trash,” Lydon says in the 2005’s documentary *The Filth and The Fury*, where one can see “Rotten” leading the band in the way they looked: languid, dressed in thrifty clothes attached with chains and safety pins, which according to him wasn’t as much of a fashion statement, but more of a direct representation of a reality—working-class poverty. McLaren, on the other hand, saw himself a sculptor, “to be a sculptor, you don’t need clay,” he would say, “I suddenly thought that you could use people! And it is people that I use like an artist, so creating something called the Sex Pistols was my painting, my sculpture.” It was McLaren who led the band into their spectacular rampage of record deals and shocking appearances, including a deal signing with A&M Records staged in front of the Buckingham Palace and a live performance set on a private boat sailing down the River Thames (passing Westminster and the Houses of Parliament) celebrating the release of their single “God Save the Queen” on the same day as the Queen’s Jubilee. This ongoing series of events proved to be good for business, and McLaren, always ready to make a profit out of the chaos, decided that it was time to take this media circus to America.

Once in the USA, the band started cracking under the pressure to look and act “outrageous.” “We didn’t come from America, we didn’t understand America. How could America understand us?” says guitar player Steve Jones. The frustration of realizing that they were being used as media puppets by a giant structure of corporate management, and that there was nothing new about punk, resulted in breaking the band up. Every move since day one had been premeditated and orchestrated. Having a manager, a record deal, and a monotonous live show was still *the old way*. And they were bored.

**Modern Architecture had been an idea around Europe** since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but its physical representation (buildings) gained popularity after World War II with the American corporation taking over the style, embracing the solid image of the modern building as the new face for architectural corporate identity and repeating this model all over the country.

When Mies Van der Rohe settled in the United States in 1937 after 30 years of practice in Germany, his status as a pioneer of modern architecture was already established by his American followers. Van der Rohe focused his efforts on the idea of implementing the “universal” space in America and, like the Sex Pistols, he championed structural honesty as a rejection of historicism and embraced the simple form as the final

elimination of “unnecessary detail”; as the most honest, clear, and visible form of creation. “Skin-and-bones” architecture was to him the pinnacle of his “less-is-more” statement (1928); an open adoption of the machine aesthetic and of the materials and the functional requirements as determining factors in the final result. Ironically, his architecture, with origins in the socialist international style, became the accepted model of building for large American corporations in the following years.

The ongoing and indiscriminate reproduction of “the box” in the ‘60s and ‘70s saw the rise of detractors of the “international style,” with Robert Venturi coining the maxim “Less is a Bore” and even Phillip Johnson admitting “being bored of the box.” The honesty of modernism started cracking down in Las Vegas as the Sex Pistols would in San Francisco in 1978.

## ***AFTER: EMBRACE THE CORPORATION, EMBRACE LAS VEGAS***

“We’re not a band, we’re a company”

- John Lydon, Public Image Ltd.

“**The Sex Pistols was going to be the absolute end of rock and roll**, which I thought it was. But the majority of the public, being the senile animals that they are, got that wrong. Too bad” said John Lydon to Tom Snyder in “Tomorrow,” Snyder’s TV show, in 1980, while touring with his new project PIL (Public Image Ltd) across the United States. By then, Lydon was tired of his own “Rotten” role and disappointed with how punk had panned out as a whole.

The name Public Image Ltd was coined by Lydon after reading Muriel Sparks’ novel *The Public Image*, “Limited” at first signified keeping tight control of his persona “not being as ‘out there’ as I was with the Sex Pistols.” But also, the idea of “Ltd” goes back to its business meaning, the limited company. PIL was not a band in the traditional sense, proclaimed Lydon, but a communications company which released records as just one of its many activities. PIL, in addition to the core musicians (Lydon on vocals, former Clash guitar player Keith Levene, and Jah Wobble on bass), consisted also of an accountant, a video maker, and a fashion designer. Lydon and Levene talked about diversifying the company into movie soundtracks, graphics, “video albums,” and even technology design.

PIL’s objective was to infiltrate mainstream media by emulating the image of the culture industry, reversing the punk cliché of demonizing the record business, and implying that

making money could be a subversive strategy of working from within; a silent plan, less flashy than the Sex Pistols' chaotic drama, but more "angular" and smart. Now Lydon was approaching honesty from a different perspective, with PIL embracing the *rock band* as the profit-making machine that it was; by getting away from the rebellious *rock and roll image*, wearing tailored suits and sporting an immaculate, couture and coiffed look in their albums and performances. He was now being honest too with his own musical taste, stating in several occasions that the only contemporary music that he really cared about was disco. Disco, for him, was *functional, useful* music. By 1979 Public Image Ltd. had penetrated the U.K. Top 20 on three occasions and, as part of his campaign against rock music, John Lydon was openly talking of PIL as a *dance* band, a sonic response to punk's "disco *sucks*" attitude and a welcoming attitude to mainstream success.

PIL received 1980 as pop stars, the reluctant-to-play-live band had now decided they were going on a three-week, ten-date tour over the United States, only to confirm Lydon's and Levene's dislike for live performances. "I'd rather send out a video of us than do a 30-date tour," said Levene to Rolling Stone magazine. But the band, as the over-publicized communication company that it was supposed to be, had not yet achieved anything. Aside from the two LPs recorded between 1978 and 1980, PIL was totally inactive in all fronts. The idea of the "umbrella corporation" wasn't more than a façade, in this case, a smokescreen fueled by drug dreams.

On May 15<sup>th</sup> 1981, PIL made its last attempt as a communication company/band with the infamous Ritz show in New York. Intended as a "live video" performance, the band played behind the venue's gigantic video screen with Lydon taking every opportunity to provoke the audience, where classic hard-rock fans made up the majority. After 12 minutes the crowd had enough and a riot started, leaving Levene injured after getting struck by a flying bottle. After this incident, the members of Public Image Ltd. wandered around New York for over a year and relocated there, spending what was left of their deal with Virgin Records. Their relationship was crumbling in the mist of drug abuse, failure, and lack of creativity. Levene and Wobble soon left the band, leaving Lydon surrounded and courted by American fans and managers who encouraged him to exploit the legacy of the Sex Pistols. Fifteen years later, John Lydon reunited the Sex Pistols for a nostalgia tour, reneging on everything PIL stood for.

**In 1977, Robert Venturi's *Learning from Las Vegas* was released.** The book, a revolutionary case study that focuses on vernacular architecture and iconography (instead of space) as the essential element of architecture of the time, is considered to be a groundbreaking manifesto and was extremely influential to postmodernism.

In this study, Venturi and Denise Brown are calling for a rebirth of architecture, an architecture inspired by the symbolism of the American commercial vernacular instead of the "bore of the box." Venturi claims that Pop Art was his main influence for focusing on Las Vegas, but also "before, my work showed a love for the ordinary, the vernacular

and signs.” Like PIL (and almost at the same time), Venturi realized that the so-called honesty of the *old way* transparency had nothing to do with day-to-day reality and had become a model that was not exciting anymore, and therefore, it wasn’t *functional* or *useful*. While the high-rise was being proclaimed king of the American urban landscape, Venturi and his partners considered that its lack of graphism and visual placement made it irrelevant for its time. Instead, they were attracted by the raw honesty of the casino, the endless parking lot and the supersized super-market.

Even though *Learning from Las Vegas* opened many eyes all over the architectural arena, Venturi is still disappointed with how iconography as a main element and Las Vegas as an architectural reference are often taken as a joke. “People today don’t even know what iconography means,” he said to Rem Koolhaas in a 2003 interview for *Content*. They discussed how American architecture and urbanism are today, more than ever, so reluctant to the commercial image and its application “because there is a neurosis about context, about politeness and about nostalgia...” Koolhaas says. Venturi replies, “Yes, Americans are so ashamed of being commercial!”

### ***NOW: CAN RESPECT KILL?***

“I respected my influences enough to never imitate them.”

-Keith Leven, Public Image Ltd.

**On November 25th, 2007, almost 30 years after the pinnacle of the Sex Pistols, a 27-year-old man was stabbed to death in Ibague, Colombia, over a discussion regarding “punk” music. Ricardo Ruges is the second person killed over musical arguments between young punk urban subcultures in Colombia this year, and certainly, is not going to be the last.**

Like with the endless implementation of the modern high-rise, the American corporation has managed to establish punk rock (and rock in general) as a new model of culture and image consumption over the urban landscape, this time with “angst-filled” teenagers and young adults as targets all around the world. MTV, iTunes, MySpace, and Hot Topic had brought the nostalgia of punk’s *in-your-face* “honesty” back to the hands of a new generation of consumers who now embrace these *outmoded* musical “movements” as *lifestyles*, as *ethics*. According to Hal Foster (2003), this phenomena, in which any product necessary for the development of the self has been made accessible by contemporary design (*identity consumption*), is just part of a “major revenge of advanced capitalism against postmodern culture,” a *perverse* fusion between culture and market.

Like an irrelevant, out-of-time and out-of-place modern building, punk rock aesthetics still prevail in our cities and are getting bigger (as *lifestyle* and *ethics*) everyday, but its static, *boring*, and repeated model is quickly proving to generate violence in response to the frustrating closeness of the supposed-to-be-open structure it represented.

When thinking about those two stabbings penetrating the leather jacket of that Colombian punk, the image of the two commercial airplanes penetrating the twin towers of the World Trade Center in 2001 came to mind. Like a perverted version of the modern dream of “free movement” over the sky of the urban metropolis or a staged performance of transit freedom within the *scenography* of the postmodern city, where in 2007, you can still find the *punk* and the *box* wandering around the streets, waiting to get killed.