

Obituary

Jamie Reid, legendary artist, rebel and campaigner: 16 January 1947 – 8 August 2023

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

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The artist, Jamie Reid passed away at his home in Liverpool in August 2023, aged 76. His iconoclastic designs for the Sex Pistols, featuring ransom-note lettering and lurid colouring, have become *the* quintessential punk aesthetic. His now ubiquitous image of the Queen with a safety pin through her lip, nowadays seemingly as threatening as a Beefeater guarding the palace, belies the shock it inspired as the cover for the Sex Pistols' single, 'God Save the Queen' (1977). The record itself was banned from the airwaves (but reached number one in the charts regardless).

Despite his lifelong antipathy towards institutions, and an earlier lack of artworld validation, Reid's work occupies an important place in British art and cultural history. The last fifteen years has seen punk graphics gain more mainstream recognition in prominent exhibitions and publications. The Victoria and Albert Museum (London) and the Jon Savage Archive (John Moores University, Liverpool) hold collections of his work. Ironically, Reid's fame in the previously derided medium of punk graphics eclipses knowledge of the varied, more nuanced body of art – including a sizeable collection of political protest work – he produced throughout his life.

Reid was part of a 1960s art school generation that grew up under the influence of Pop Art, challenging hierarchies of high and low art, and bringing their art school training into new, more egalitarian areas of music and the counterculture. This was despite Reid being more enamoured with jazz than pop music or art during this time. Comparators of his include punk and post-punk graphic designers such as Malcolm Garrett, Linder Sterling, Peter Saville, Gee Vaucher and Barney Bubbles.

Despite his essential role in defining punk, Reid remained untethered to punk, or any other definable movement. His politics were decidedly 'leftie,' and of a libertarian bent. He was a Druid, and his spirituality was deeply intertwined with his art and politics. His view of matriarchal society as a solution to the world's ills was perhaps engendered through his positive relationship with his mother, Nora Gardner, while his Druidism stems from the influence of his great uncle, George Watson MacGregor Reid (c1860-1946), who raised his father. George had become the self-appointed head of the Druid Order following World War One, before which his various adventures included a stint as Labour MP for Clapham, during which time he supported striking miners and held mass rallies. While this prominent figure made a great impression on Reid, the tales he passed down were also taken with a pinch of salt, as he was well known for his hyperbolic tendencies. Reid's pride in his Scottish roots also stems from this influence. Reid's father, a journalist, was similarly an outlier in suburban Croydon, remembered for his involvement in the general strike, while his brother, Bruce, worked as press officer for the Committee of 100 (C100), and was one of the Spies for Peace during the 1960s. Both Reid's parents were in CND, while as an artist he himself critiqued war and militarism throughout his life's work.

Reid received a traditional art school training at Wimbledon Art School (1962-64), which he joined aged just 16. He then attended Croydon Art School (1964-68) where he famously met Malcolm McLaren. His politics were transformed by the events of 1968 in Paris, and the two organised a college sit-in. They also had a tangential connection to King Mob, the radical, English offshoot of the Situationist International (SI) [1957-72], during this period. The ideas of the SI are evident in the experimental independent media produced by Reid in the ensuing years. In the early 1970s, Reid created visual material using an agit-prop style at the political, community print studio, Suburban Press (London, 1971-75) [set up by Reid, Jeremy Brook, and Nigel Edwards in 1970. Sophie Richmond and Nigel Kershaw joined later]. A lot of the material Reid created for the in-house magazine, also entitled *Suburban Press*, was later used for his work with the Sex Pistols. Suburban Press was run along co-operative lines and was mutually supportive with a network of left-libertarian political presses and organisations. Unlike similar community endeavours it was run to make a profit, which was reinvested in the venture.

Figure 1. Jamie Reid (1974), *Suburban Press* (back cover). Courtesy of John Marchant Gallery.

Reid used his graphics to make Situationist political jargon comprehensible to a wider audience. In *Suburban Press*, his illustrations focused on the corrupt antics of local councillors, businessmen, and national organisations involved in the wholesale redevelopment of Croydon since the 1950s. They depicted the new alienating environment featuring high rises, new roads and houses and a

shopping precinct that typified post-war planning. Reid loved the Croydon in which he was raised. While Reid attacked the sterile conformity of suburbia in *Suburban Press*, he supported the original egalitarian aims behind their development in the 1930s, bemoaning how suburbs had then become dull, conservative environments over time.

After *Suburban Press* was wound up in 1975, Reid moved to the Outer Hebrides with girlfriend Sophie Richmond, and John and Carola Bell of the radical, west London printing co-operative, Crest Press. They spent a hard and unsuccessful year as crofters, until in 1976 he got a telegram from McLaren, inviting him to return to London to put his subversive design skills to use for the band he was promoting, the Sex Pistols. Sophie then ran the office of Glitterbest, the Pistols' management company set up by McLaren.

Fig.2 Jamie Reid (1977), *God Save The Queen* promotional poster.

Reid saw the band as the vehicle for his political ideas. He used the avant-garde technique of détournement, to combine visual elements and text from various sources, humorously sending up vaunted British institutions of power as well as the music industry itself. His friend Helen Wellington-Lloyd contributed to this process, introducing ransom note lettering for some of the group's early flyers. Unlike most punk graphic design that was produced in-house for major record labels, Reid worked independently as a designer. He was especially proud of their success in spreading a message of subversion while getting the music industry to pay for it. This approach, gleefully expounded by Malcolm McLaren in Julien Temple's mockumentary *The Great Rock N Roll Swindle* (for which Reid acted as designer), came in for criticism in later years; from questioning of whether taking the record industry's cash while simultaneously attempting to subvert it amounted to collusion, and in very vocal terms from lead singer John Lydon, who wanted to know what had happened to all the money. Reid remained immensely proud of what they had achieved, however, and steadfastly asserted the idealistic nature of the endeavour. The fallout from the end of the Pistols' saga sometimes overshadows everything they achieved, and in Reid's case it is unquestionable that his designs permanently altered the visual landscape of youth and popular culture.

Fig.3 Jamie Reid (1976), *Anarchy Flag*. Courtesy of John Marchant Gallery (private collection).

Despite the immense impact of the Pistols, Reid has largely occupied a place independent from the commercial world. In the 1980s he worked on various forms of creative expression for the project *Leaving the 20th Century* (title taken from Christopher Gray's 1974 translation of the writings of the SI, for which Reid provided the graphics) with his partner, the actor Margi

Clarke. He also worked on the poster and titles for the highly rated film, *Letter to Brezhnev* (Chris Bernard, 1985) which featured Clarke in a starring role.

In the late 1980s, Malcolm Garrett provided Reid with a studio space at the Shoreditch design and recording studio, The Strongroom, where Garrett ran his design agency, Assorted Images. By the 1990s, Reid was based in Liverpool, the home of his Scouse partner, Clarke. The couple's daughter, Rowan, was born in 1992. After they split, he remained in Liverpool, meeting and marrying another Liverpoolian, Maria Hughes, in 1996. He later became closely involved with the Florence Institute (known locally as The Florrie), a derelict former boys' club, in Toxteth, helping to raise funds to renovate and run the building as a community centre. A complete retrospective of his work, entitled *Casting Seeds*, was held there in 2016. He found a host of like-minded groups that combined creativity with activism, among them the art group, Visual Stress, who performed radical street actions, often focused on the appalling legacy of the slave trade in Liverpool.

Figure 4: Jamie Reid (1996), *Nina Edge Action with Visual Stress*. Courtesy of John Marchant Gallery

It was also during this period that he began to produce artwork for Afro Celt Sound System (formed by producer and guitarist Simon Emmerson in 1995), which combined traditional Irish folk with West African music and electronica. This creative involvement continued to the end, and following Emmerson's death earlier this year, Reid had come up with a plan to re-release a track by one of Emmerson's earlier bands. The song, fittingly titled 'Calling Back the Ancestors', had been remastered by Killing Joke maestro Youth, for release on his new record label, and Reid was in the middle of producing a music video featuring Maxine Brown, a performer and participant with Afro Celt and Visual Stress.

Figure 5: Jamie Reid (1994), *Taking Liberties* (album cover version). Courtesy of John Marchant Gallery.

Following the demise of the Sex Pistols, Reid had continued to be involved in various political campaigns, opposing the Poll Tax, and designing the cover for a Boy George single released in opposition to Clause 28. He created the album artwork for the *Taking Liberties* compilation album (1994), which protested the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, and in the aftermath of the New Labour victory of 1997, continued to speak truth to power, creating a series of images opposing the introduction of ASBOs.

Figure 6: Jamie Reid (2002), *God Save Our Yobs*. Courtesy of John Marchant Gallery.

The retrospective of his work, *Peace is Tough* (New York, 1997), which subsequently travelled to Tokyo, Dublin, and Athens, was also staged at Jump Ship Rat (Liverpool) [2001] and The Arches in Glasgow (2011), where it was held jointly with Banksy. The artwork, *Peace is Tough* was originally created by Reid in 1993 for the Greil Marcus book, *In the Fascist Bathroom: Writings on Punk, 1977-1992*.

During the last two decades, Reid's exhibitions have been concerned with intersecting political, environmental, and spiritual themes. In the wake of the Iraq War, he contributed work to the *Pax Britannica* exhibition at the Aquarium Gallery (2004), which also featured work by Richard Hamilton, Banksy, Gee Vaucher, Peter Kennard, *Guardian* cartoonist Steve Bell and others. The gallery also held a retrospective of his work, *May Day, May Day*, in 2007.

Regarding the co-option of punk and his designs, in 2004 he expressed antipathy towards the inheritors of his legacy, the YBAs.

Brit art – Hirst and Emin, etc – leave me cold... I associate the YBAs with Thatcherism
– it was spawned out of that, people paying a lot of money for nothing. It's just empty
gestures – the nouvelle cuisine of the art world.

(Cabut 2004: n.pag)

Throughout his career, he regularly produced spins on his iconic 'God Save the Queen' design, and one of the most memorable of these was a God Save Damien Hirst parody he created in 2009, for a collective art campaign entitled *For the Love of Disruptive Strategies and Utopian Visions in Contemporary Art and Culture*. The artist collective, Red Rag to a Bull (featuring Reid, James Cauty [formerly of KLF] and Stuckism founder Billy Childish), launched this campaign, which satirises Hirst for his greed, and bullying hypocrisy in retaliation for the artist's attempt to sue a 16-year old street artist for copyright over the use of his image, *For the Love of God* in a collage.

The last decade has seen Reid collaborating with Occupy London, Pussy Riot and Extinction Rebellion. He created a collection of huge banners for Druidic rituals, and switched his focus to paintings and drawings exploring English heritage and shamanism/paganism, as well as land art. For the OVA project, Reid worked with a team to turn his symbol, which conflates the A for Anarchy, with V for Victory and O for Compassion, into a crop circle of sorts, by sowing wildflower seeds in the shape in a meadow at the Lost Gardens of Heligan in Cornwall.

Throughout his life, Reid's political sensibilities were evident, not just in his work, but in the way he lived. An old friend, Nigel Kershaw, who set up *The Big Issue (TBI)* with John Bird, and who Reid knew from the 1970s printing press world, said that not only did Reid contribute his artwork and writing to *TBI*, but he also became involved in the lives of the vendors, recalling Reid

and his wife Maria making enquiries about a vendor who was missing from her pitch. Through gestures such as this, he recalls Reid being interested not just in the cause, but also in the people who were affected.

Fig.7 Jamie Reid (2003), *Welsh Ritual*. Courtesy of John Marchant Gallery.

Fig.8: Jamie Reid (2022), *OVA*, land work. Courtesy of John Marchant Gallery.

Reid's funeral (15th September 2023) started with a procession through the streets of his adopted city, Liverpool, with the participants holding banners and placards featuring his agit-prop in homage. The celebration of his life continued with seed sowing at St Agnes Fields, organised by people involved with Northern Flower House organisation, which helps to spread wildflowers throughout the Northwest, another local project Reid was involved with. A bagpiper and two members of Afro Celt Sound System ushered the mourners into a service at the unitarian church (which featured a reading of *Ode to a Mouse* by Robert Burns, referencing Reid's Scottish heritage, by Angus Farquhar, who was the driving force behind the powerful protest group Test Department in the 1980s). Tributes were paid by his daughter, Rowan and his old friend and colleague, Nigel Keshaw, while an inspirational poem by Tom Calderbank received a riotous reception. His burial at a woodland site on the banks of the Mersey, in a coffin draped in the scarf of his beloved Fulham FC, was overseen by fellow Druid Philip Carr-Gomm, and featured a eulogy in Welsh and a song by Welsh musician Gwennno; before the party returned to The Florrie. It was a fitting tribute to an artist dearly loved by his friends, family, and collaborators in artistic, environmental, spiritual and community endeavours.

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