

You'll never beat the system by bombing Number 10

Perceptions of the utility of political violence in anarcho-punk
1977-1987

Rich Cross

No Sir, I Won't: Reconsidering the legacy of Crass and anarcho-
punk, Oxford Brookes, 28 June 2013

Contention

- Anarcho-punk should not be seen simply as a pacifist-punk culture. The culture's self-identification as 'peace punk' was not immediate, and anarcho-punk quickly became diverse in political and cultural ambition, especially concerning the nature of opposition to the state
- Perceptions of the utility of political violence changed within a few short years, as anarcho-punk responded to a range of pressures and counter-pressures. Changing views of violence reflect shifts in the centre of political gravity within the movement

"Boring fucking politics will
get us all shot"

No Sir, I Won't: Reconsidering the legacy of Crass and anarcho-
punk, Oxford Brookes, 28 June 2013

Airey Neave

- Blown up in the House of Commons car park by the INLA in March 1979



Warrenpoint and Mountbatten



- Warrenpoint ambush: PIRA kill 18 soldiers; blow up Lord Mountbatten – August 1979

Inner-city riots -1981



- Wave of rioting across British inner-cities in spring of 1981



Falklands War - 1982

- Nearly 1,000 killed in war between Britain and Argentina over the Falklands-Malvinas



Great Miners' strike – 1984-85

- Widespread, year-long clashes between striking miners, the police (and soldiers in police uniform)



Battle of the Beanfield - 1985

- Police assault and break-up traveller convoy, to prevent gathering at Stonehenge - June 1985



Broadwater Farm riot – October 1985

- Huge disturbance on north London estate; PC Blakelock killed



Punk and violence

No Sir, I Won't: Reconsidering the legacy of Crass and anarcho-punk, Oxford Brookes, 28 June 2013

'England got punk...!

- “Germany got Baader Meinhof; England got punk, but they can’t kill it.”

Crass, flyposter on The Roxy club, London, 1977



'A Baader-Meinhof situation'

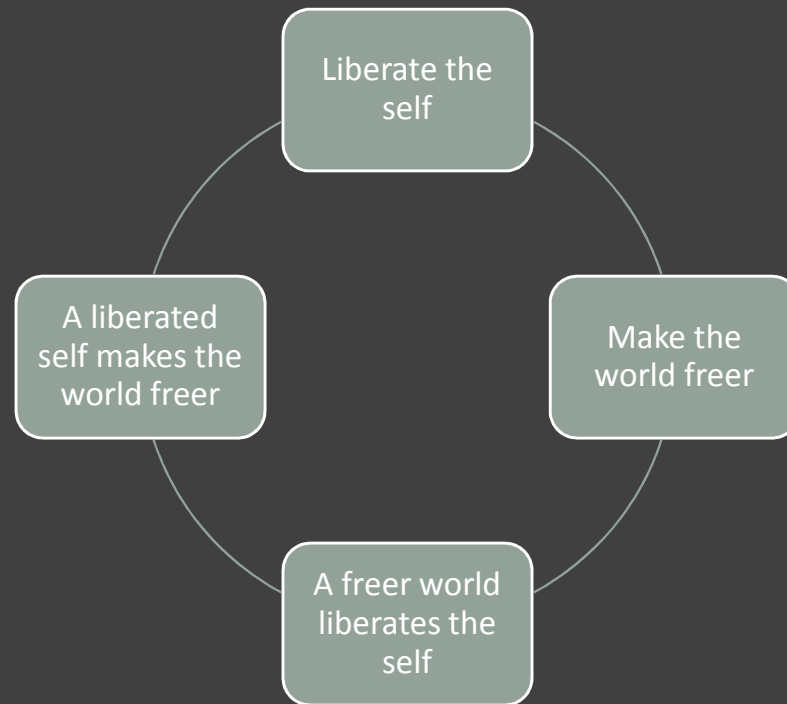
- The German paramilitary group is an explicit early reference point

I think that essentially we are a pacifist group of people. But I'm very aware of the fact that unless people stop and listen then Baader-Meinhof is going to occur here. I think that a lot of our activities [...] attempt to stop it. I don't want to see a Baader-Meinhof situation, it means ID cards and being stopped in the streets every ten minutes. I don't want the thing to go that far

'An introduction to Crass', *Ripped and Torn*, Issue 16, circa 1978.

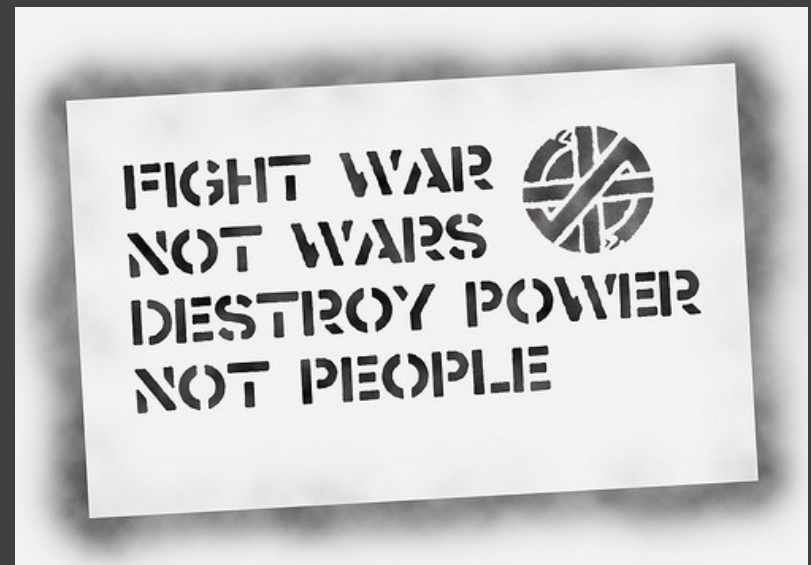
Anarcho-punk's political ambition?

- To encourage the freedom of the alienated and oppressed self; rejecting all oppressive social constraint?
- To rally and mobilise voluntarily collective endeavour to change the world?



Anti-militarism is not pacifism

- **Anti-militarism:** the quality of being opposed to the establishment or maintenance of a governmental military force
- **Pacifism:** the belief that a recourse to violence of any kind is unjustifiable



Crass and Poison Girls

CRASS

- Strong identification with 1960s counter-culture
- Cultural practice rooted in art, performance
- Clear identification with outsider culture
- Few connections with traditions of formal anarchist movement



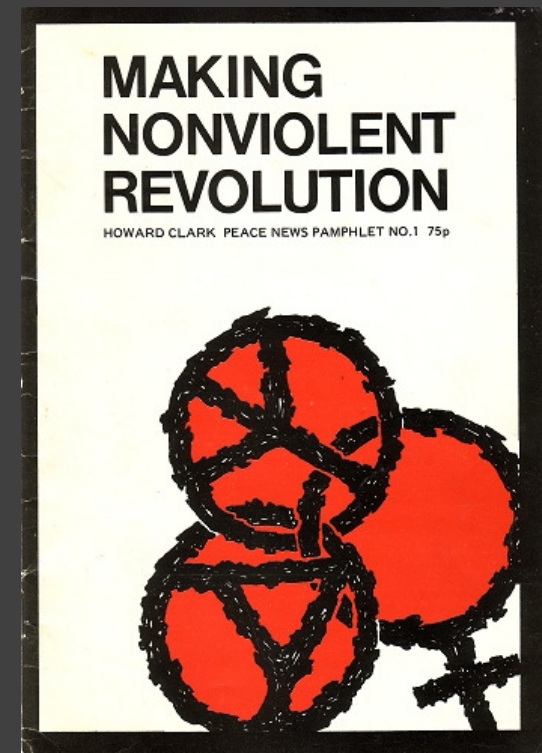
POISON GIRLS

- Looser connections with 1960s counter-culture
- Cultural practice rooted in cabaret, theatre
- Less marked associated with outsider culture
- Stronger connections with traditions of formal anarchist movement



'Making nonviolent revolution'?

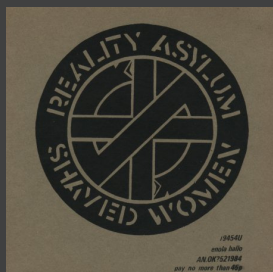
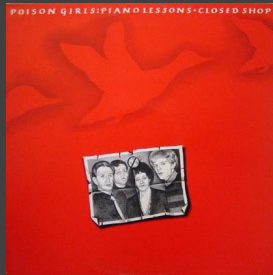
- Not a text referenced explicitly by Crass (or Poison Girls), but articulating a similar sense of political-cultural convergence
- "a fusion of the anarchist critique of the state and the pacifist critique of violence as a means of revolutionary transformation"
Andrew Rigby, *'Peace News: the early years'*, peacenews.info.



Why a 'pacifist' anarcho-punk?

- Strong moral, existential basis of the culture's individualist anarchism
- For Crass, the retention of the ethos of hippy counter-culture
- Resilience of the idea that the entrapments of the state could be avoided
- Uncertainty and disagreement about the nature of the ambition: abhorrence of violence underpinned that
- Equating the use of political violence with the prescriptions of the Leninist and Trotskyist left in Britain
- Anarcho-punk's semi-detachment from the 'mainstream' of British anarchism

Feeding and Hex



- Few explicit **pacifist** statements in the early releases of either band

General Bacardi: as exception

I've seen it all before, revolution at my back door,
Well who's to say it won't happen all again?
Cos the General's sip Bacardi, while the privates feel the pain.

They formed little groups, like rich man's ghettos,
Tending their goats and organic tomatoes.
While the world was being fucked by fascist regimes,
They talked of windmills and psychedelic dreams.

Crass, 'General Bacardi', *The Feeding of the 5000* (Small Wonder, 1978)

- Tensions writ large:
 - Authoritarian 'revolution' delivers more misery
 - Opting out of the struggle is a selfish negation of responsibility

Bloody Revolutions / Persons Unknown

- Benefit single: Crass and Poison Girls rallying to the defence of a group of anarchists and libertarians being **framed** for their 'violent' intent
- Codifies Crass' anarcho-pacifism in opposition to the state-seizing vanguardism of the left

You talk about your revolution, well, that's fine
But what are you going to be doing come the time?
Are you gonna be the big man with the tommy-gun?
Will you talk of freedom when the blood begins to run?
Well, **freedom has no value if violence is the price**
Don't want your revolution, I want anarchy and peace

Crass, *Bloody Revolutions* (Crass Records, 1980)

Systems 'mostly made of people'

- A theme reasserted on the anthemic *Big A, Little A*

No-one ever changed the church by pulling down the steeple
You'll never beat the system by bombing Number 10
Systems just aren't made of bricks, they're mostly made of people
You can send them into hiding, but they'll be back again

Crass, *Big A, Little A* (Crass Records, 1981)

A peace-punk culture

No Sir, I Won't: Reconsidering the legacy of Crass and anarcho-punk, Oxford Brookes, 28 June 2013

Flux

- 'All the arms we need'

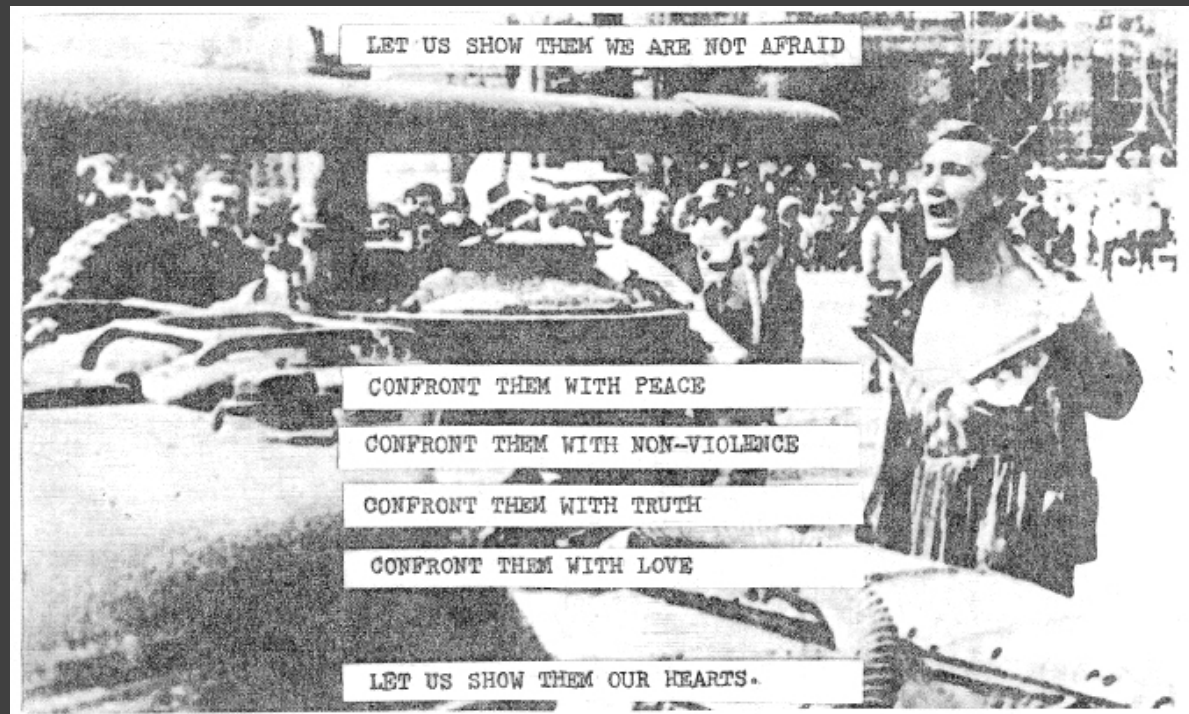
Sleeve of *Strive to Survive* album



Chumbawamba

- 'Let us show them our hearts'

Lyric flyer for
Chumbawamba song
Lies



Peace under pressure

No Sir, I Won't: Reconsidering the legacy of Crass and anarcho-punk, Oxford Brookes, 28 June 2013

Windscale tour?

- Crass consider organising a ‘walking tour’ of oppressive sites of the capitalist war state
- Plans advance before Crass’ concerns about the likely outcome trigger a rethink – and cancellation
- “there was also no question that there’d be helicopters, riot police and a lot of violence [...] And we weren’t prepared to do it. Now, whether or not that a failure of revolutionary spirit – maybe.” Penny Rimbaud



Stop the City

- Series of anti-capitalist carnivals and demonstrations in financial sector of London, 1983-84
- Show strains at the limits of nonviolence on the part of punk participants
- Left unclear the question of 'what next?'



Poison Girls

- Challenge to pacifist precepts less of a stretch for Poison Girls
- Part of the process of establishing difference and separation
- Rhetoric could not have been contained in *Bloody Revolutions/Persons Unknown*

I know what it means to want to blow up the Queen
and Rio Tinto Zinc
And to take a shot at the greedy lot
who sell us tea to drink

Poison Girls, 'Rio Tinto Zinc', *Where's the Pleasure* (Xntrix, 1982)

Keeping the peace

No Sir, I Won't: Reconsidering the legacy of Crass and anarcho-punk, Oxford Brookes, 28 June 2013

'Greenham'

- Feminist espousal of nonviolent anti-war, anti-nuclear sentiment



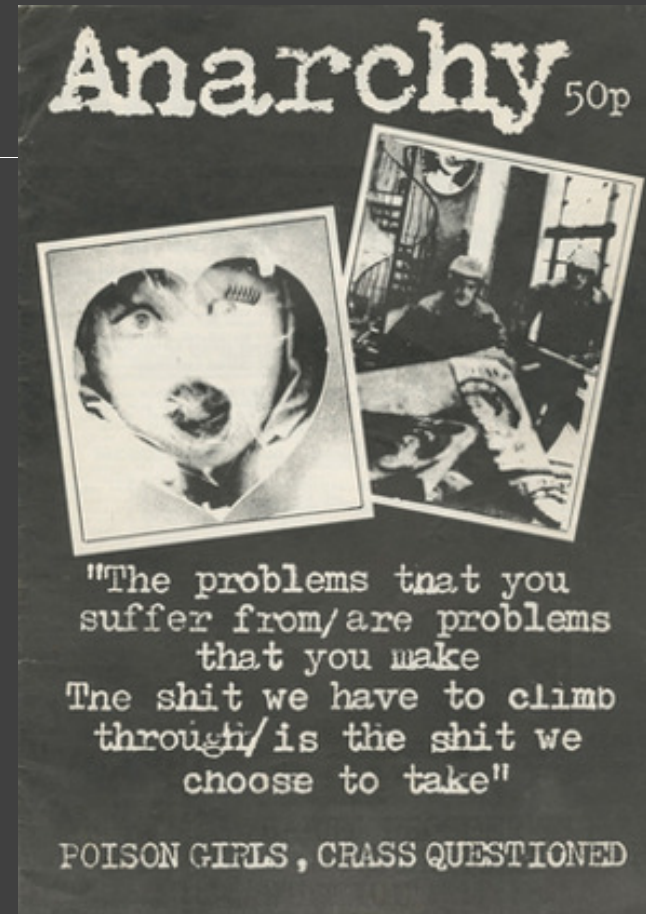
- Key influence on nature of anti-nuclear direct action 'at the bases'

Anarcho-punk: scene and culture

- Not a homogenous culture, not all activists engaged at the forefront of confrontation with the state
- Matrix of influences, point of reference, self-selected political priorities
- Few mechanisms for agreeing reorientation of approach
- Anarcho-punk's pacifism remained ingrained in its counter-culture
- Acceptance of the utility of a recourse to violence was *divisive*

'Do what you want to do'

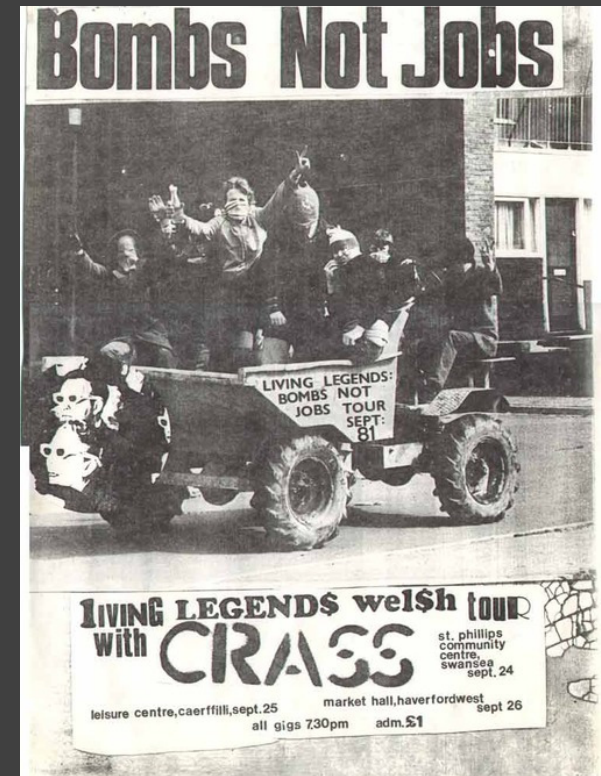
- Advocacy of 'militancy' exposed rifts between the 'counter-culturists' and the 'insurrectionists', ripping-up the peace pact between them
- Crass, at least, felt an acute sense of responsibility about advocating actions that young activists might enthusiastically emulate



Breaching the peace

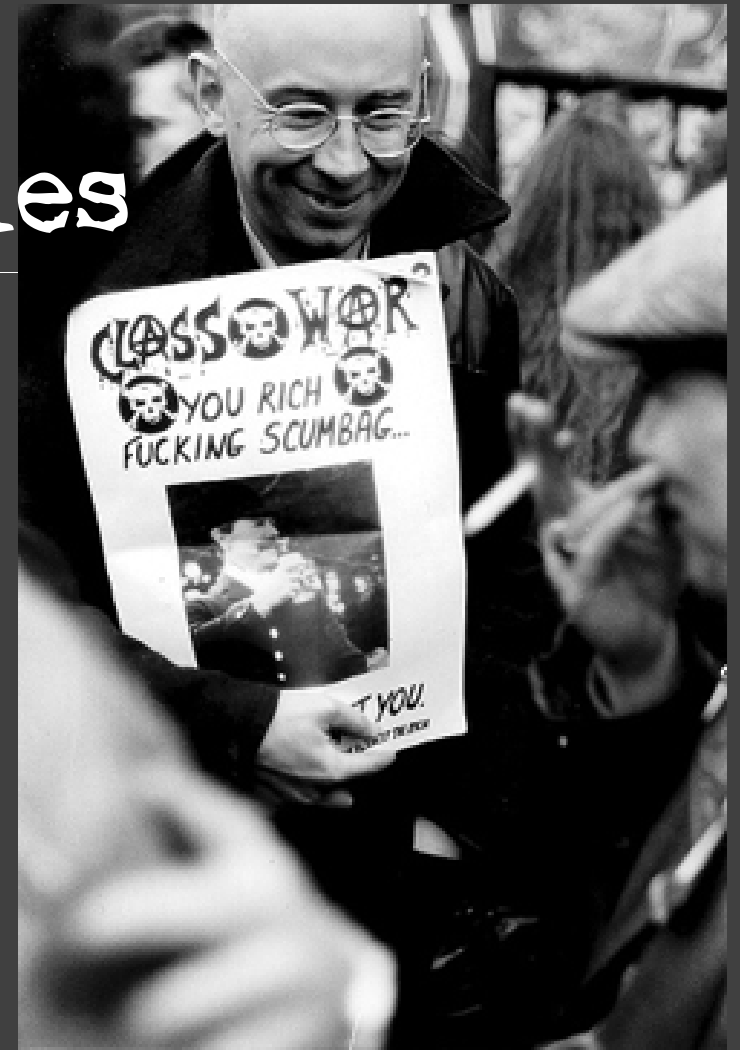
No Sir, I Won't: Reconsidering the legacy of Crass and anarcho-punk, Oxford Brookes, 28 June 2013

Counter counter-cultural voices?



New anarchist agencies

- Centre of political gravity in the 'mainstream' anarchist movement rebalances
- New agencies, including *Class War*, articulate a revanchist class-based anarchism, reaffirming the utility of 'class violence'
- Powerful dynamic between this shift and the new political uncertainties of anarcho-punk



Animal liberation

- Anarchist punks become key players in newly militant animal liberation movement
- Activists participate in clandestine raids on laboratories breeding farms
- Approach is increasingly confrontational, violent, and to some quasi-para-military
- 'Nonviolence' seen as increasingly out of kilter with need



Anti-fascism

- Punks, including anarcho-punks, join street-level anti-fascist activity
- Active rejection of anarcho-punk's earlier perspective: 'left-wing, right-wing, you can stuff the lot'
- Nonviolence seen as cowardice and complicity



'No time to be nice'

- Currents within anarcho-punk culture gripped by frustration and impatience
- Sense that nuclear conflagration was ever-more imminent – time had run out
- Growing perception that the culture was falling short



Crass and *You're Already Dead*

- Crass' final single represents the zenith of the band's militancy
- 'Call to arms' teetering on the very edge of pacifist commitment

There's one little detail they appear to have missed
You don't have to be passive just 'cos you're a pacifist

Crass, 'You're Already Dead', *You're Already Dead* (Crass, 1984)

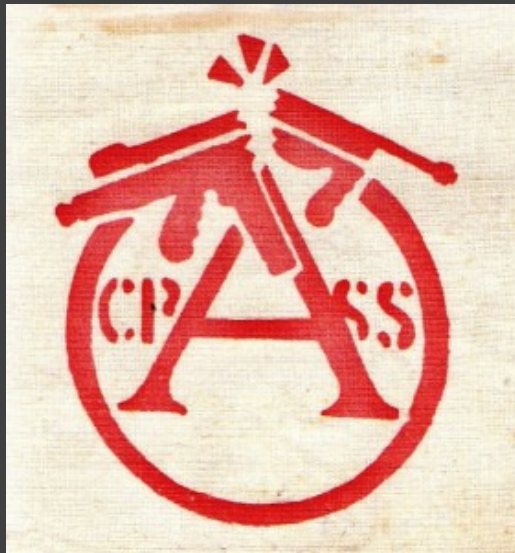


'I am not a worm'

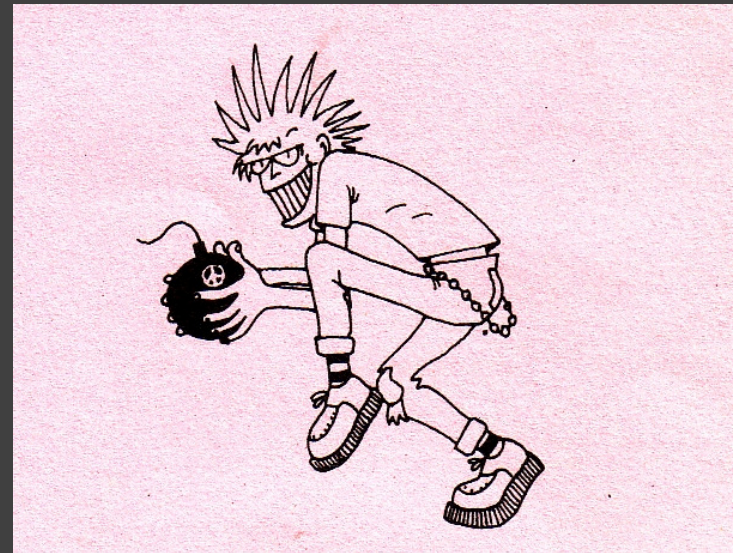
- Rimbaud wrote a handout for Crass' final tour in 1984
- Questioned personal commitment to pacifism
- Made case that because the 'peace movement' was 'revolutionary' in nature it had to accept responsibility for potential future bloodshed



All the arms we need?



Stations of the Cross, 1979
Patch included with album



You're Already Dead, 1984
Detail from the sleeve

Crass and the endgame 'logic'

- The band need “the space to hopefully sit down and think about what we should be doing, which might be arranging how Mrs Thatcher is wiped off the face of the fucking earth or something else. Possibly that’s that direction we’re gonna end up...”

“What we’ve been saying for the last seven years to the society we live in is that unless you start taking what you’re doing seriously, and understand what you’re doing, there’s gonna be a bloodbath.”

Crass, *MaximumRocknRoll*, October-November, 1983

Brighton bomb

- Timing means that anarcho-punk commentary on the IRA bombing of the British cabinet in 1984 is muted
- Brief equivocal reference by Conflict in 1985 – and by a few others



This is the end

- By 1987, anarcho-punk culture's first wave had retrenched
- Anarcho-punk was more disaggregated, less intimately associated with pacifism
- British anarchist culture – which had been reinvigorated by 'peace punks – was again increasingly defined by insurrectionist class-based politics

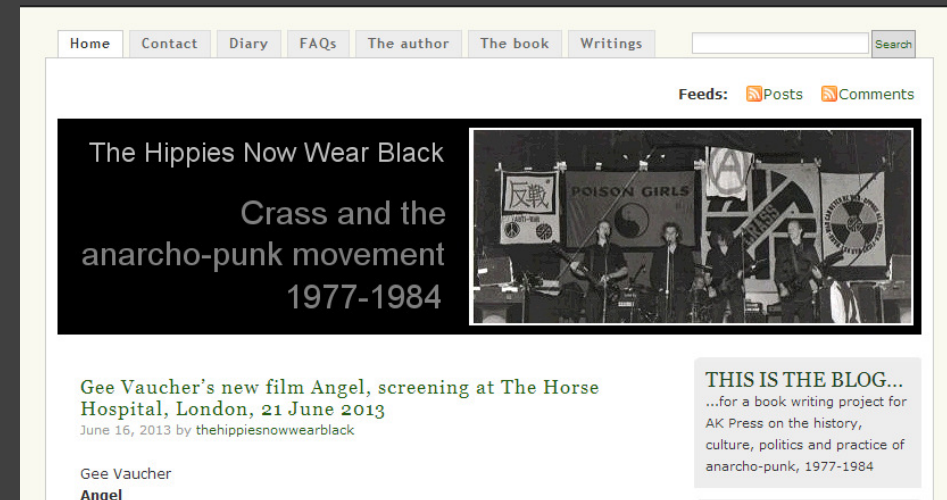
- Over a decade, anarcho-punk's relationship with the question of political violence became volatile, dynamic, contextual and contested

Contact

- Rich Cross

info@thehippiesnowwearblack.org.uk

<http://thehippiesnowwearblack.org.uk>



The screenshot shows a website with a navigation menu at the top containing links for Home, Contact, Diary, FAQs, The author, The book, and Writings. A search bar is located to the right of the menu. Below the menu, there are feed icons for Posts and Comments. The main content area features a large black banner with the text "The Hippies Now Wear Black" and "Crass and the anarcho-punk movement 1977-1984". To the right of the text is a black and white photograph of a band performing on stage with various flags and banners, including one that says "POISON GIRLS". Below the banner, there is a post titled "Gee Vaucher's new film Angel, screening at The Horse Hospital, London, 21 June 2013" dated June 16, 2013, by thehippiesnowwearblack. The author of the post is listed as Gee Vaucher and the title of the post is Angel. On the right side of the page, there is a sidebar with the heading "THIS IS THE BLOG..." and a description: "...for a book writing project for AK Press on the history, culture, politics and practice of anarcho-punk, 1977-1984".