

Space Punk: The Online Video Years



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These clips of Pussy Riot are amazing. Members of the all-woman anonymous feminist collective - in bright dresses and red, yellow, green, pink and blue ski masks – are rocking out, jumping around and shouting and making a mess with pillow feathers and fire extinguisher spray. The sound is shambling messy punk with distorted aggressive vocals and the lyrics and the statements they've released reveal both a sense of humor and an anti-Putin, anti-government, anti-materialism, anti-sexism message.

The feeling is angry and celebratory at the same time. This would be refreshing just as regular punk rock performed on a stage in a club, but Pussy Riot only play unsanctioned shows in public spaces. They've been staging these guerilla shows in Moscow for a few months now (for which they've been arrested and fined) and the clips show the group set up in Red Square, inside a posh boutique, on a fashion show runway, even on top of a bus.

"Группа Pussy Riot жжет путинский гламур" ("Group Pussy Riot burns Putin's glamor") <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZUhkWiiv7M>

"Девчонки из PUSSY RIOT захватывают транспорт" ("The girls of PUSSY RIOT seize vehicles") <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qEiB1RYuYXw>

According to the group, "we come and take over platforms that don't belong to us and use them for free." The videos show how they occupy and temporarily transform public spaces... filling them up with color, sound, motion... claiming control with humor and chaos... even acting on the volume of space around them by dispersing feathers and confetti, and setting off a fire extinguisher.

Security guards and shop employees look puzzled and unsure, while bystanders and shoppers appear curious, amused, as if they'd been waiting for some kind of anarchic, libidinous rupture in daily life.

But also notice how constructed the clips are... the clips above are tightly-edited montages of several different performances... the soundtracks of both feature

drums but all you see in the videos is a single guitarist. Given the spaces they are performing in, they actually don't seem to have much in the way of amplifiers either... Something happened in those places on those days, but it was something quite different than what is represented.

I'm not saying that's bad. We don't expect that Jack White or Josh Homme or whoever actually recorded all those layered guitar tracks at the same time. The truth in the videos is in projecting an idea of the possibility of what can happen in public spaces. Where rock-n-roll has traditionally been concerned with recordings and touring, this is more about doing something in public space and representing it online. The performances are about the moment and for the moment. But there's also some pretty serious staging going on. It's ephemeral and it's for the archive.

What Pussy Riot is doing has something to do with rock-n-roll, punk rock, street theater, performance art, protest and flash mobs but none of those terms really hit the mark. "Interventionist protest art" would be a decent, if dull-sounding, description but the framing of Pussy Riot as a *band* is significant. It suggests something that anyone can get in on. Because, who knows – ? Maybe the recording industry will stop threatening to collapse and get on with it. Maybe we'll see a new form - a blossoming of bands that dispense with "touring the album" in favor of creatively engaging the poetics of public space.

In the meantime, here are some "space punk" video nuggets from the archive, each pointing to a possible opening in everyday life where space can be occupied and momentarily transformed, be it obliquely, obnoxiously or pointedly.



Mike Long - "Shake Appeal" <http://vimeo.com/5627051>

Mike Long "Shake Appeal"

In 366 days, the Hamilton, Ontario performance artist and DJ made 366 videos of dancing (for the camera) in public space. The Stooges' "Shake Appeal" in front of a police boat is probably my favorite, but... there's a lot to choose from. I remember one with some very cool slow moves to Minor Threat in the supermarket that was



pretty boss but it seems to have disappeared. No problem - "Vitamin C" by Can in the cereal aisle is plenty nice. He plays the music on a boom box (not on headphones) while dancing, then replaces the recorded audio with the actual track.



Mike Long - "Vitamin C"
<http://vimeo.com/3975811>

Rikki Lovejoy - "Baby Got Back in Department Store"
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1GKaVzNDbul>

Rikki Lovejoy "Baby Got Back in Department Store."

There's a whole phenomena of videos of Walmart intercom pranks and most are either dull or painful, but this one transcends the genre. Sir Mix-a-Lot's "Baby Got Back" is already a pretty complicated piece of pop music. The song that proclaims "I like big butts and I cannot lie" is nothing but a blatant, offensive objectification of women... unless you also see the lyrics as advocating expanded notions of beauty

and acceptance of different body types, or pick up on the intro skit in which a pair of valley-accented girls – presumed white – go on about how disgusted they are by the size of the rear end of another girl ending with “She’s just so ... black!” So “Baby Got Back” as performed over the Walmart p.a. system by a big-size white teenage boy (he calls his production company FAT Videos) just adds a few more layers to ponder. Is there much more to it than just being obnoxious? Probably not, but there could be. Plus, unlike most of the intercom prank kids he manages to pull it off without giggling.

SF Pride at Work “Don’t Get Caught in a Bad Hotel”

A pair of women wait to check in at the counter of the Westin St Francis Hotel in San Francisco while members of a marching band quietly collect in the lobby. When one of the women turns to the other and exclaims “Wait a second, honey we can’t check in here - this hotel’s under boycott!” the lobby erupts with a messy



SF Pride at Work - “Don’t Get Caught in a Bad Hotel”
(Link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-79pX-1IOqPU>)

version of Lady Gaga’s “Bad Romance” complete with trombones, synchronized dancing and lyrics addressing the worker-led boycott of the hotel. There are hundreds of flash mob musical clips floating around the web – but this one shows the form sidestepping the usual “that was weird but so what” self-indulgence. Pop music, social struggle, the site and the network all come together: making a ruckus in the lobby makes it an event – but the real audience is potential visitors to the hotel, not the ones already booked in. (The boycott ended successfully last year when employees accepted a new contract.)