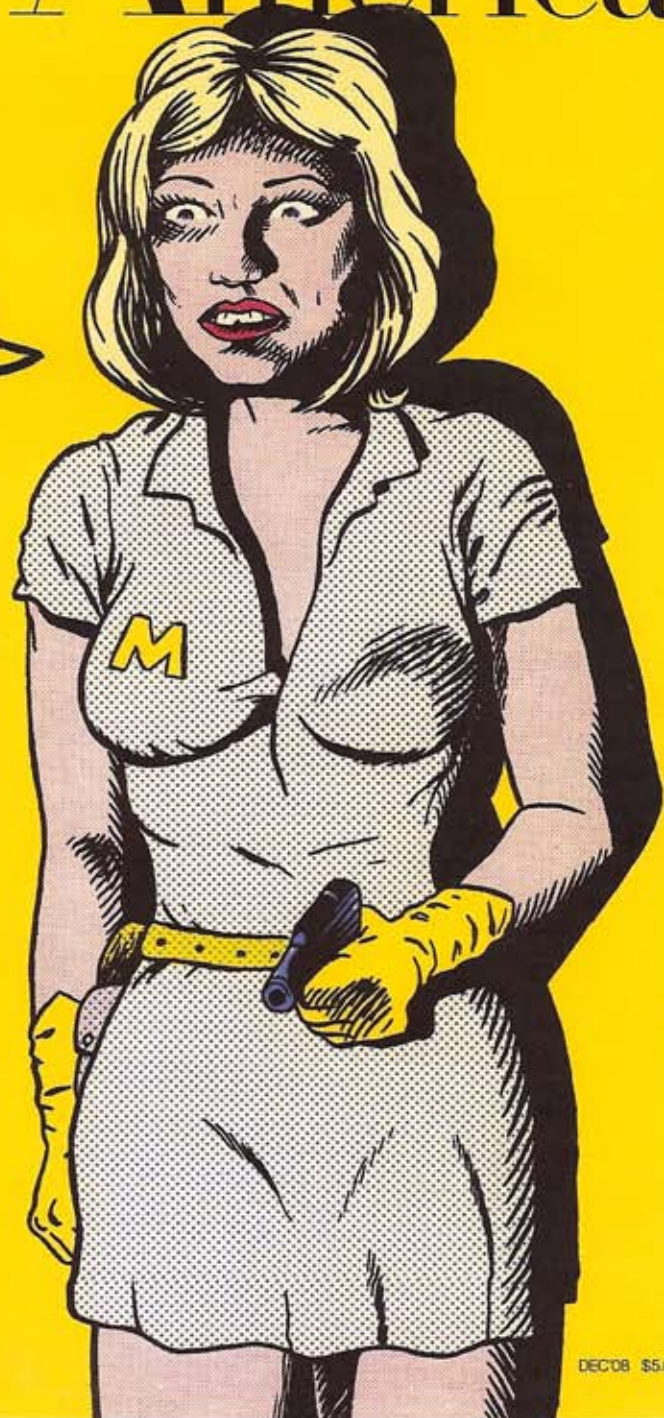


Art in America

INTERNATIONAL • REVIEW

BEFORE YOU DIE....
TELL ME THAT YOU'LL
ALWAYS LOVE ME,

RAYMOND
PETTIBON
FOCUS
ASIA
CATHERINE
OPIE
GIORGIO
MORANDI
GUILLERMO
KUITCA
SARAH
MORRIS



DEC08 \$5.00

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG PUNK

PETTIBON

With nearly 200 concert flyers, plus posters, record jackets, books, skateboards and T-shirts, a packed exhibition documented the unorthodox start to a mainstream career.

BY RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN



THE ANNALS OF CONTEMPORARY art are full of improbable trajectories, tales of women and men developing into widely celebrated artists from the most unlikely beginnings. Think, for instance, of Pinot-Gallizio, the middle-aged Italian pharmacist who assisted at the birth of Situationism and invented a radical painting practice in the provincial town of Alba in the 1950s, or Marcel Broodthaers, a Belgian poet who one day decided to create something "insincere" and thus launched what would ultimately be a hugely influential art career and a new genre of art-making (institutional critique). The path taken by Raymond Pettibon, one of the most admired artists of the last decade, is also out of the ordinary, especially when compared to the current MFA-program-to-gallery-to-museum conveyor belt that nearly every successful young artist must ride.

A recent exhibition at Specific Object/David Platzker, a bookstore-gallery tucked away in a corner of the massive Starrett-Lehigh Building in Chelsea, did an excellent job of tracing Pettibon's activities in the late 1970s and early '80s, when his drawings and 'zines emerged amid the violent cacophony of the Los Angeles punk scene. Platzker has recently been utilizing the space to show off his accomplishments as an entrepreneurial archivist: last season he covered the walls with a copy of every one of the 156 artist-designed bulletins issued by Art & Project, the important Dutch venue for conceptual art. Although the Pettibon show occupied only a single room, it packed in a formidable amount of material. One wall was filled with a chronologically arranged collection of nearly 200 flyers, each of them sporting a Pettibon image, for concerts by nearly every important West Coast punk band. Mostly on standard 8½-by-11-inch sheets and nearly all on white paper, the flyers are offset-printed with the exception of a couple of faded photocopies. On the facing wall was a collection of posters and record jackets (LPs and 45s, plus a few cassettes). The other two walls featured a display of Pettibon's books in vitrines and an assortment of skateboards, T-shirts, posters and stickers imprinted with his work. Another T-shirt graced a mannequin standing in a corner. Music by West Coast punk bands played continuously in the gallery, albeit at uncharacteristically low volume.

For those who know Pettibon's later work, certain early flyers jump out as premonitions. A handbill advertising an Apr. 12, 1982, gig by Black Flag, No Sisters, VIPs and Secret Service at Berkeley Square features a bare arm onto which someone has just carved the word "malaise" with a razor (visible in the drawing). The drawing has that characteristic Pettibon line—at once nervously tentative and brutally definitive—and the carved word has been written in his equally distinctive uppercase lettering. Razors, that favored accoutrement of punk style, show up quite a lot in Pettibon's early images, usually in the hands of and applied to the bodies of women.

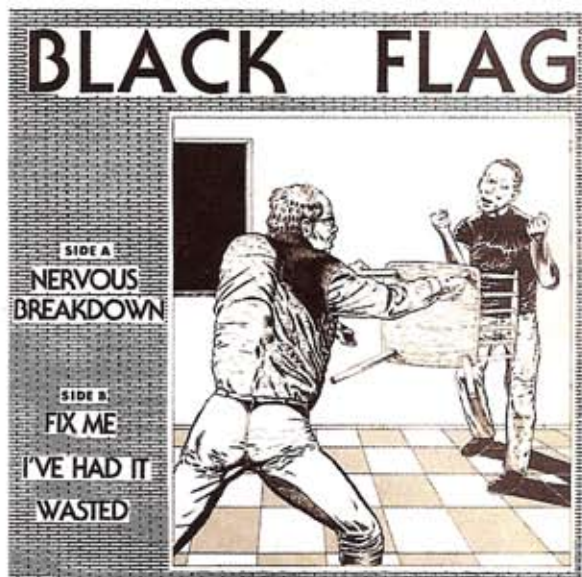
Like his punk cohorts, Pettibon has always been attracted to socially transgressive imagery. Charles Manson is a frequent guest in his drawings, sometimes clearly identified ("Free Charlie," advocates an editioned print from 1983 of a sword-wielding Manson) and sometimes, as in a handbill for a 1980 Black Flag concert at the Starwood, suggested by a Christlike figure. The skin-carving razors are also probably as indebted to Manson rituals as to punk fashion. As the Manson obsession suggests, Pettibon shares punk's love-hate relationship with the countercultural 1960s. An offset print from 1982 of a revolver-toting lowlife carries the slogan "O.D. a Hippie." Expanding on this anti-

BLACK FLAG



RAYMOND PETTIBON: *BLACK FLAG: SIX PACK*, 1981, OFFSET-PRINTED RECORD SLEEVE WITH VINYL RECORD, 7 INCHES SQUARE.

OPPOSITE, *BLACK FLAG: EVERYTHING WENT BLACK*, CA. 2000, SCREENPRINTED SKATEBOARD DECK, APPROX. 31 BY 8 INCHES. ALL PHOTOS THIS ARTICLE COURTESY SPECIFIC OBJECT/DAVID PLATZKER, NEW YORK.



BLACK FLAG:
NERVOUS BREAKDOWN,
1978. OFFSET-PRINTED
RECORD SLEEVE WITH VINYL
RECORD, 7 INCHES SQUARE.

record of Black Flag's fortunes, from its pre-Henry Rollins beginnings to its breakup in 1986. Along the way are some instantly iconic images, like a 1981 tour schedule for Black Flag that shows an aging, pudgy, almost naked Elvis nailed to a cross, with the accusatory caption "You didn't love him enough." Just below uppercase letters spelling out the band's name across the top of this flier is the logo Pettibon devised for the band: four upright, slightly out of alignment black rectangles—imagine a multipanel painting by Ad Reinhardt hung at different levels. This minimalist device, seemingly so opposed to Pettibon's blend of pulp imagery and literary quotation, appears on every Black Flag ad and product, from the countless flyers to record covers and skateboards. It's a brilliant bit of branding, and a reminder that punk bands, like every other player in our culture, high or low, mainstream or underground, must compete to be heard.

In fact, there was a business model behind Pettibon's early career. It can be seen in the merchandise lists for his books and prints that accompanied the records released by Black Flag, and the ads written into the margins of some flyers identifying the images as art from forthcoming artist's books by Pettibon. For what now seem like ridiculously low prices, fans could order

[ST.] RAYMOND PETTIBON[E]: 1978-1986" WAS ON VIEW IN NEW YORK AT SPECIFIC OBJECT/DAVID PLATZKER [JUNE 16-SEPT. 26]. A TWO-PART SURVEY OF PETTIBON'S WORK AT REGEN PROJECTS, LOS ANGELES. OPENED WITH THE EXHIBITION "RAYMOND PETTIBON, SEMINAL WORK 1978-1986" [SEPT. 13-OCT. 18]. THE SECOND PART, "RECENT WORK: CUTTING ROOM FLOOR SHOW (2008)," OPENS AT REGEN PROJECTS THIS MONTH [DEC. 13, 2008-JAN. 24, 2009].

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Pettibon's work in signed and limited editions. His red-ink signature and edition numbers could be seen scrawled at the bottom of many of the prints on view at Specific Object. SST, the record label founded and run by Ginn, acted as the distributor of Pettibon's work. Such DIY productions were central to punk. Usually this was a means to bypass the mainstream recording industry; here it also set up an alternative art world, creating a slew of teenage collectors.

Pettibon wasn't above laughing at his own marketing efforts. Here's how he prefaced a psychedelic-themed issue of *Tripping Corpse*: "Why is Pettibon, who's been associated with punk up until now, doing a magazine like this? In one word, money. M-O-N-E-Y. You see there are more hippies than punks. Indeed, marijuana is the biggest cash crop in California, my home state, and as we all know, hippies like to look at drawings while they hallucinate."

Speaking of money, the Pettibon 'zines that sold for \$1.75 when first published now go for hundreds of dollars. Even the flyers, unsigned and in unknown editions, fetch relatively hefty prices. It's the fate of every radical art movement to leave behind a market in printed ephemera. Will the handbills of the California punk scene one day become as important as those flyers and exhibition announcements produced by Dadaists, Surrealists, Situationists et al., material now deemed suitable for display in the vitrines of great museums? It's certainly a likely fate for those that Pettibon had a hand in. What is it, apart from their connection to the activities of important artists, that makes these dated, sometimes tattered souvenirs of obscure, long-gone events so prized? Perhaps in some way the fragile, fugitive qualities of such printed matter are emblematic of the fleeting nature of the very phenomena they document.

The cutoff point of the Specific Object show was 1986. By that time, Pettibon's relations with SST and Black Flag had soured. He was angered by the cavalier way his work was being used by his brother's band and record label. Many of the handbills feature panels taken from the 'zines, sometimes cropped, combined and otherwise altered in ways unauthorized by the artist. A few Black Flag posters feature Pettibon's drawings superimposed on brightly colored backgrounds. They probably made great ads for the band but they don't look like anything else in Pettibon's oeuvre. Ultimately, he had to retake control of his own art, and that meant moving from the punk underground into the official art world. The sequence of flyers at Specific Object ended with a small exhibition announcement for Pettibon's first New York solo show, at Semaphore Gallery in SoHo. It marks the end of one noteworthy career and the beginning of another that is still very much in progress. ○

BLACK FLAG: LOOSE NUT/LIVE 1985.
SCREENPRINTED
SKATEBOARD DECK,
28 1/4 BY 9 1/4 INCHES

