



Behind the scenes at the Screamers' video shoot at Target Studios (Photo: Ruby Ray)

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More Than Mosh Pits, 'Void California' Displays the Art of a Punk Scene

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Punk rock is a rare music genre. It becomes the identity of its fans; they don't just listen to punk, they become punks, and many stay that way well into adulthood.

I became a punk at 12. Two decades later, I still rock black-and-white band t-shirts and walk around with my headphones on, the Misfits and Black Flag blasting in my ears.

The magic of being punk is that it licenses a certain freedom from social norms. Thinking back to the moment when I realized I could just do what I wanted still feels as freeing and uplifting now as it did back then. The power and drive that freedom inspires on full display in the show *Void California: 1975-1989*, curated by CCA's graduating curatorial practice class at the [Wattis Institute](http://www.wattis.org/index?alt=1) (<http://www.wattis.org/index?alt=1>).



Raymond Pettibon, 'Untitled' (I thought California would be different), 1989
(Photo: Kevin L. Jones/KQED)

The core of the punk ethos is “just go for it,” an attitude demonstrated in the prolific output of Raymond Pettibon, patron saint of punk art. His zines, paintings and drawings dominate the *Void California* show, but with good reason. Pettibon’s work for Black Flag is iconic, and his style — menacing ink figures accompanied by disjointed phrases — conveyed the urban experience during a dangerous and desperate time.

The exhibit paints a comprehensive picture of what the spectrum of punk art looked like in the 14 years represented. On one side is the work intended to shock: the graphic photography of *Vile* magazine and the crude, Ralph Steadman-like drawings of Fred Tomaselli.

Other reaction-causing work — inciting fear instead of disgust — comes from Survival Research Laboratories (<http://www.srl.org/>), whose performances featured destructive, threatening machines smashing objects and lots (and I mean *lots*) of fire. Their performances, which occurred in random parking lots, were described as both scary and exhilarating by those who saw them.



Bruce Kalberg, 'Su Tissue (Suburban Lawns),' 1984. (Photo: Courtesy of Ewa Wojciak/Yes Press Inc.)

The majority of the work in *Void California* comes from the other side of the spectrum, from artists seeking not to shock, but to make thought-provoking work. Photography by Ruby Ray and Bruce Kalberg would fit equally well into a “fine art” gallery exhibition, totally separate from its punk context. While Ray’s photos focus on characters in the San Francisco punk scene through a documentary lens that could belong to Lee Friedlander, Kalberg’s photos take LA’s most notable scenesters and portray them as rare, beautiful creatures caught in the wild. His shot of Screamers’ vocalist Tomato du Plenty in a spiky tribal outfit will burn into your consciousness like a sun flare.

While about half of the exhibition is art, the other half is made up of museum-worthy artifacts. Televisions screen short but influential documentaries from filmmakers like Joe “Target Video” Rees — namely his footage of the psychobilly kings the Cramps playing Napa Mental State Hospital (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fat2rswNJ1k>) and former-Dead Kennedys frontman Jello Biafra’s San Francisco mayoral campaign.

Greta Snider’s schizophrenic 5-minute-long *Hard Core Home Movie* is also well worth a viewing. The 16mm footage comes from the infamous San Francisco venue The Farm, a no-holds-barred punk venue, the likes of which would never be allowed to exist today.



Cameron Jamie, Screen shot from video compilation 'The Neotoma Tape,' 1995. (Photo: Kevin L. Jones/KQED)

Negativland (<http://www.negativland.com/news/>), Bay Area tape wizards known mostly for their far-from-subtle political commentary (<http://ww2.kqed.org/arts/2014/10/28/negativland-is-still-cultural-jamming-taking-on-our-masters/>) and their pranks on the media (or whoever else they don't like (<http://ww2.kqed.org/arts/2014/06/17/negativland-provides-tracks-for-infamous-single-asks-fans-to-remix/>)), provide artifacts from *A 10-8 Place*, their landmark concept album about life in Contra Costa County. Not only does the exhibition include a few of the hundreds of tape reels used to make the album, a vitrine holds a sampling of the grass clippings Negativland stuffed in each record they pressed.

For any casual gallery-goer, *Void California* succeeds in proving the artistic merit of punk-made art from a pivotal moment in the state's cultural history. But those who will appreciate this collection the most are the punk fans who seek to ingest any and all memorabilia from the genre that changed their lives.

Void California: 1975-1989 is on view at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in San Francisco until April 9. Admission is free and gallery hours vary; for more information, visit [wattis.org](http://www.wattis.org) (<http://www.wattis.org/view?id=4,305>).

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