

FROM *LET IT ROCK* TO *WORLD'S END*
430 KING'S ROAD

Jane Withers

In late 1976, Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood's shop at 430 King's Road was reincarnated under the banner *Seditionaries*. When the shop opened, with its opaque glass facade and small name plaque, it had a clinically neat appearance reminiscent of a dentist's office. The pristine front, however, didn't last long. Within weeks, the shop, its windows reinforced with a metal grill, boarded up and emblazoned with graffiti, looked more like a betting shop under siege. *Seditionaries'* fortified facade emerged as a visual record of punk's rise amid the regular clashes of warring youth factions that congregated in the World's End area on weekends.

The antagonism incited by *Seditionaries* and demonstrated by the defaced facade, the police raids on the premises, and the campaigns launched to enforce the shop's closure, all reveal the extent to which the small shop was popularly perceived by both its supporters and adversaries, subcultural and establishment alike, as the catalyst and symbolic bastion of the punk revolt. Such theatrics as surrounded punk's rebellious upsurge had not been seen on King's Road since the sartorial pyrotechnics of the 1960s.

Seditionaries was the fourth in line, and certainly the most notorious, of the series of shops opened by Malcolm

McLaren, Vivienne Westwood and a steady stream of collaborators on the site of 430 King's Road. From the fifties revival promoted by *Let It Rock* and *Too Fast To Live Too Young To Die*, to *Sex* and *Seditionaries*, the laboratories of the punk revolt, to *World's End*, the stage for the voyage into romantic historicism (and the shop that is still the showcase for Westwood's work today), 430 King's Road operated on the front-line of cult style. According to McLaren, it provided "a playground for eccentricities to occur."¹ The history of 430 King's Road in the 1970s offers a significant perspective on the developments of youth culture in that decade, and tells the story of McLaren and Westwood's adventures in cult style—their search for a metaphor for revolt. The precedent for McLaren and Westwood's venture into shopkeeping was the idea of the pop boutique as it had evolved in the London of the fifties and sixties—an environment McLaren and Westwood knew well.

The network of boutiques that emerged in London in the late fifties and early sixties provided an infrastructure for the rise of pop culture, transforming whole districts of London (King's Road and Carnaby Street were the main "boutique strips") into playgrounds for Mod consumption. They established the central role of the boutique as a forum for the assimilation and dissemination of

subcultural style—a hothouse for cult activity. Shops like Mary Quant's *Bazaar* opened on the King's Road in 1955. Widely acknowledged as the first of the new boutiques, *Bazaar* spearheaded the post-war retail revolution. Displays were designed to shock, Quant recalls, creating an atmosphere of "a sort of permanently running cocktail party."² *Bazaar* and its followers re-invented fashion as fun, and shopping as a form of entertainment.

The "long front" of pop culture, as Lawrence Alloway described it, abolished traditional hierarchies of culture, value and taste, and promoted cultural convergence. The boutique played a cathartic role by providing a stage for pop culture's characteristic synthesis of the mutually sustaining iconographies of Pop Art, pop music, and pop fashions. For an emergent generation of artistic activators, the boutique environment presented a vehicle for effecting the artist's transfer, as Marshall McLuhan observed, from "the ivory tower to the control tower of society."³

Extravagant boutique designs dominated the landscape of the so-called "Swinging Sixties." Shops like *Granny Takes A Trip*, the psychedelic cavern on the King's Road that sold all the Hippie accoutrements for the "Summer of Love" and which once had an American car decorating its facade, provided a con-

stant spectacle for the Saturday parade that frequented the strip. In many ways, these were pop culture's most flamboyant monuments. The pop boutique, as it evolved in the sixties, offered the possibility of an environment that was both an artistic and a commercial outlet—a fusion of studio and gallery, court and stage. To McLaren, who had spent a good part of the sixties in art school, "[The shop] was a replacement for being an artist in another way. You didn't want to paint pictures in 1970. You'd come out of the whole environmental school of thinking, that whole conceptual art."

It was this style of shopkeeping and movement-making, as well as the fading energy of the late Hippie era, that McLaren and Westwood revived and developed, making 430 King's Road the most singular and significant cult landmark of its time. If, as George Melly observed, Mary Quant's *Bazaar* contained "the embryonic concept of 'Swinging London,'" the series of shops initiated by McLaren and Westwood at 430 King's Road (*Sex* and *Seditionaries* in particular) played an equivalent role in the radically different subcultural subterfuges of the seventies.⁴

Situated way down the King's Road from Sloane Square, where the road bends round into Chelsea's more dilapidated area of World's End, 430 King's Road



WESTWOOD AND MCLAREN IN *LET IT ROCK*, 1972.

already had quite a track record in 1971 when McLaren and Westwood moved in. Its most recent incarnation was as *Mr. Freedom*, Tommy Robert's shrine to pop culture. *Paradise Garage* succeeded *Mr. Freedom* and capitalized on the rock 'n' roll revival, selling used denims and Americana behind what looked like a set for a desert gas station. It was this shop that most interested McLaren, providing as it did a timely foil to his own interest in the Teddy Boy cult.

McLaren and Westwood rented part of *Paradise Garage* and began by experimenting with styles of the fifties, promoting first the Teddy Boy and later the Rocker/Biker styles—archetypal images of the teenage rebel and synonymous with the heroic era of rock 'n' roll. The retro styles stood out in sharp contrast to the fading Hippie dress of the time—an ethos McLaren professed to hating.

Their *Let It Rock* was conceived as a shrine to the twin linchpins of Ted culture: music and sartorial style. Decorated as a faithful replica of a Ted's dream sitting room circa 1955, complete with a glass cocktail cabinet displaying period ornaments and accessories, guitar-shaped mirrors, cinema posters and framed photographs of rock 'n' roll idols, the shop provided an authentic backdrop for McLaren's collection of period records and music and cinema

ephemera, and Westwood's flamboyant copies of Ted drape suits that made up the stock. The choice of a living room as the setting for the Ted revival reflected the urban, territorial nature of the Ted tribes. The living room was the symbolic proscenium for urban adventure, a style capsule that transported kids from the drab realities of daily life to the fantasy land of exaggerated style that Ted inhabited. With the jukebox blaring, the shop generated a club atmosphere and attracted a following of hardcore Teds and obsessive revivalists.

When *Paradise Garage* folded, McLaren took over the whole premises. The expanded *Let It Rock* had its name emblazoned on the facade in fluorescent letters stylized to look like musical notes. Inside the shop, the period flavor evolved into something reminiscent of a musical set with its black interior decorated with fifties posters and, as McLaren remembers, a scenic mural of "a lamppost down a mean, dark Northern street at night in the fifties with smoke stacks in the background and a few posters."

McLaren used the space as a platform for fantastic displays created from bizarre ensembles of "found" props, clothing, and cult objects: T-shirts emblazoned with glitter names cascading down a ladder, a display of re-conditioned valve radios or a wall hung

with chicken wire and used to display stiletto-heeled shoes. Westwood recalls those days:

Every Friday I used to be up all night sewing—making something for this special shop, painting the backs of leather jackets and putting studs on things and he'd be in there redecorating the shop. He'd be up all night redoing it as if it were an environmental happening each week. The shop was supposed to open about 10:30 - 11:00. By one o'clock he still wouldn't be finished and there'd be all these Teddy Boys outside the door saying, "come on Malcolm, let us in," and he wouldn't let them in until he'd finished.⁵

The transition in 1973 to *Too Fast To Live Too Young To Die* confirmed McLaren's shifting allegiance from the Teddy Boy to the Rocker style. The shop was given a new black fascia dominated by the new name (a slogan adopted by James Dean fans after his death) inscribed around a skull and cross-bones in the style of the emblems decorating Bikers' jackets. The stock changed too. Alongside the drapes and zoot suits were leathers and T-shirts extravagantly customized with studs, rips, zips, chains, even segments of bike tires—clothing inspired, according to Westwood, by the dress of the gangs of Bikers who congregated around Chelsea Bridge at the time.



The threatening machismo of the outlaw biker identity, charged by its associations with speed and danger and the spectre of death, provided a sinister counterpoint to the peacock pyrotechnics of the Teddy Boy. The switch to a less overtly retro idiom was tactical. McLaren and Westwood encountered the predicament of most ardent revivalists: the material culture may be easy enough to exhume, but the spirit is harder to resuscitate. The Ted revival, as Westwood explains, was stillborn: “Malcolm began to get bored with the ideas of Teddy boys basically. They just looked so amazing that he thought they were some kind of expression of revolt, and he just got rather tired in the end of them all talking about which record had come out on the same label.”

As the disastrous social and economic conditions of the sixties became apparent, a widespread nostalgia focused on the seemingly more benign post-war decade of the fifties, whose imagery was absorbed into the mainstream and, in the process, divested of its power. A sanitized version of the Teddy Boy assumed an almost folkloric flavor as it took its place in the character repertoire of television and cinema. 430 King’s Road was frequented by wardrobe departments searching out Ted dress for MOR TV popster Lionel Blair or period flavor for the David Essex rock revival movies *That’ll Be The Day* and *Stardust*.

The compounded effect of all this was to convince McLaren to change tack, to forgo retro and embark on something new. The fetish element apparent in the Biker clothing was made the subject of the next adventure. When 430 King’s Road re-opened in 1974, the intention was obvious: the new name, *Sex*, was emblazoned across the facade in giant shocking-pink letters.

The cult style of *Sex* was constructed from the iconography of the taboo. Raiding darkened closets, McLaren and Westwood flaunted their findings in public. The shop promoted hardcore rubber and leather, fetish and bondage wear as “alternative” streetwear, precipitating a demonic parade of the loaded and stereotypical images of sexual “perversity.” As Westwood explained: “We were writing on the walls of the Establishment, and if there is one thing that frightens the Establishment, it’s sex. Religion you can knock, but sex gives them the horrors.”⁶

Sex was designed to amplify the subversive intent. Conceived as a parody of a conventional sex shop, its appearance mimicked the sleazy look of “authentic” sex shops—the kind secreted in red-light districts. The loud black and pink facade set the tone, and behind the shop name was sprayed the slogan, “Craft must have clothes but truth loves to go naked.” The windows were boxed in like



SEX SHOP EXTERIOR, 1975.



SEDITIONARIES INTERIOR, 1977.

the display cases that offer a titillating glimpse of the wares inside a “real” sex shop. But in place of the usual pin-ups and fetish objects were *Sex* cult objects—studded jackets and customized T-shirts displayed against flesh-colored sponge. The central doorway was curtained to conceal the interior from public inquisition. It was deliberately intimidating.

Inside, the walls were lined with grey sponge and sprayed with pornographic and revolutionary slogans extracted from the writings of Alex Trocchi, who had become a conduit for the anarchistic philosophy of the International Situationists in the sixties. The bondage wear was displayed on mannequin torsos and hung on gym-like wall bars. The compounded effect created a dark and dangerous looking interior that drew vicarious energy from its apparent associations with a fetishist’s torture chamber. The blaze of graffiti amplified the subversive nature of the enterprise, exploiting its associations as both the graphic style of protest and the illicit language of pornography scrawled in toilets.

Sex acted as a magnet drawing collaborators to the cause. The customers divided into two factions, as McLaren recalls:

Half were MPs and fetish buyers from out in the country places, from all over. And half were kids that came to the

shop because it was so extraordinary. It suddenly swept them up and made them feel very dangerous and unique and important. It was a great ladder to climb, that shop. It was something that when kids had finally sequestered themselves into that environment they never wanted to leave.

Besides the intricate displays of hardcore fetish wear drawn from or inspired by the catalogues of specialist outfitters, the shop began to sell other clothes, like T-shirts decorated with porn images and revolutionary slogans. The famous bondage trousers were also developed under *Sex*'s reign. The effect of *Sex* clothing when paraded in public was predictably volatile. One man, David Fullbrook, was arrested on the King's Road for wearing the notorious T-shirt displaying two naked cowboys. The police raided the shop and McLaren and Westwood went to court, having hit on a style that provoked a direct confrontation with conservative British society. "If you want to find out how much freedom you really have," Westwood observed, "try making an extreme sexual statement in public."⁷

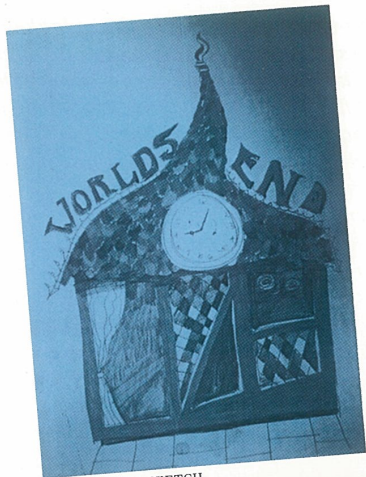
The *Sex* shop exemplifies the significant role of the cult shop in the development of subcultural style. As McLaren explains:

The environment of the shop gave the clothes a reason to exist because outside

of that shop they may have looked a little less dangerous. They may have looked like where they had come from. The fifties clothes may have looked just like part of some old rubbish bin. The fetish clothes may have looked just like something you might have found if you'd crept into the backstreets of Richmond in some strange, backwater fetish shop. You put them into a position where suddenly they were culturally significant and they embodied another buzzword which was "Pop". They were pop everytime.

The success of *Sex* and the cult style it promoted was reliant on a dialogue. Operating at street level, the shop functioned as a forum for the assimilation and dissemination of ideas—a focus for an internal drama promoting a sense of a continuous narrative essential to subculture's existence. The shop had a paradoxical identity as both a covert, insular world, and as an outward challenge to society's values.

When punk exploded on the public horizon, it was time for another change: the shop was transformed into *Seditionaries*. If the seeds of iconographic subversion central to the punk revolt were nurtured in *Sex*'s exploration of the forbidden, *Seditionaries* expanded that lead into a new realm. *Seditionaries* was designed as a stage for punk's anarchic celebration of chaos and destruction as creative principles. Articulation



DAVID CONNOR SKETCH.



WORLD'S END SHOP FRONT, 1980.



PIRATE OUTFIT, 1981.

lating the inchoate nihilism of the punk revolt, *Seditionaries* presented a vision of an apocalyptic utopia that sought to locate punk on the precipice of cultural collapse.

While *Seditionaries'* facade with its metal-clad windows appeared symbolically fortified, the interior conjured up a disturbing innerworld haunted by the specter of violent destruction, past and future. The side walls were papered with vast black-and-white photographs of bomb-damaged Dresden in the aftermath of World War II and were illuminated by the glare of film lights protruding from a jagged hole in the ceiling. All this served to mediate and politicize the image of punk's own world-vision enshrined on the back wall: a vast color photograph of the most durable emblem of tourist London, Piccadilly Circus, inverted (an idea inspired by the fact that it is illegal to stick a postage stamp of the Queen's head upside down), to symbolize punk's own anarchic ambition to turn the world upside-down.

Seditionaries sold the staples of the punk uniform—bondage jackets and trousers, parachute jackets, long-sleeved “Anarchy” shirts and T-shirts decorated with porn images and political signifiers—all under the label “Clothes for Heroes,” a legend also inscribed on the shop door. The media tag that

Seditionaries accrued as “couture” punk, and the relatively high prices of the clothing, reveal *Seditionaries*’ status within the movement as something approaching a designer shop.

Despite the “Do-It-Yourself” ethos promoted by the eclectic punk style and the lip-service paid to the rejection of capitalism (a position for which McLaren and Westwood as shop owners were heavily criticized), punk precipitated a revival of alternative fashion outlets in London and the north of England on a scale that had not been seen since the sixties. For instance, another key King’s Road shop, Stephane Raynor’s *Boy*, shot to notoriety with its arsonist window display. Characteristic of punk’s fetishism of violence and body mutilation, it comprised glass display cases containing bits of burnt clothing and what purported to be fragments of a corpse—the remains of an arsonist said to have been trapped in the shop after starting a fire. The effect of the mutilated limbs, made from a material that its creators, Peter Christoferson and John Harwood, called Revultex, was realistic enough for the police to carry out forensic tests and to fine the store for “Indecent Exhibition.”

Boy’s survival today as a thriving business that sells punk classics demonstrates how punk style has been incorporated into the vernacular.

Cleansed of its original resonance, punk dress (much like new wave graphics) exists as simply another available style option in the ever-expanding pluralism of the late 1980s.

The final incarnation of 430 King’s Road was *World’s End*, named after its locale, thereby demonstrating the extent to which the shop had become a tourist attraction in its own right. This was Westwood and McLaren’s last joint venture before their partnership broke up after almost a decade of experimenting with the “untouchable.” Westwood and McLaren opened the eighties with their theatrical Pirates collection (as promoted by Adam Ant and Bow Wow Wow)—the first stop on a voyage picking through history and remote cultures in search of other images of the outlaw to succeed punk.

The design of *World’s End* set the stage for an imaginative leap into a timeless world inspired by Alice’s voyage through the Looking Glass, and is demarcated by the thirteen-houred clock that dominates the shop’s cottage-style and bay-windowed facade. As if in fulfillment of the invocation of Alice’s duchess, this world does go round “a deal faster than it does.” But the clock’s hands whirr backwards into a lost kingdom where the fantasies drawn out in the rich pageant of the clothing collide in an historical and cultural abyss.

Architect David Connor's series of drawings for the facade illustrate a collage of fairytale themes: Lewis Carroll's vision of the fantastic, fused with the crooked house of the Crooked Man, a pirate's galleon, and the chalet style of the cuckoo clock. The interior of the shop, its sloping wooden floor and chandelier with gold light bulbs illuminating the procession of mannequins used to display the current tribal identities, fulfills the promise of a magical half-world.

The idea of moving backwards through history and across cultural boundaries was presented in the design of *Nostalgia of Mud*, the shop McLaren and Westwood occupied for a brief period in St. Christopher's Place. The mud map which camouflaged the facade of the shop located the action somewhere in the sub-continent, and the design of the interior was inspired by the idea of an archaeological dig. The entrance level, hung with portraits and a giant chandelier, was partly cut away to reveal a bubbling pool in the mud-baked basement, a crumbling world layered to reveal its own past, stretching back from a pseudo-classical grandeur to primitive origins.

Although the flamboyant romanticism of Westwood's later collections, with their characteristically rich embroidery of color and style, appeared as the antithe-

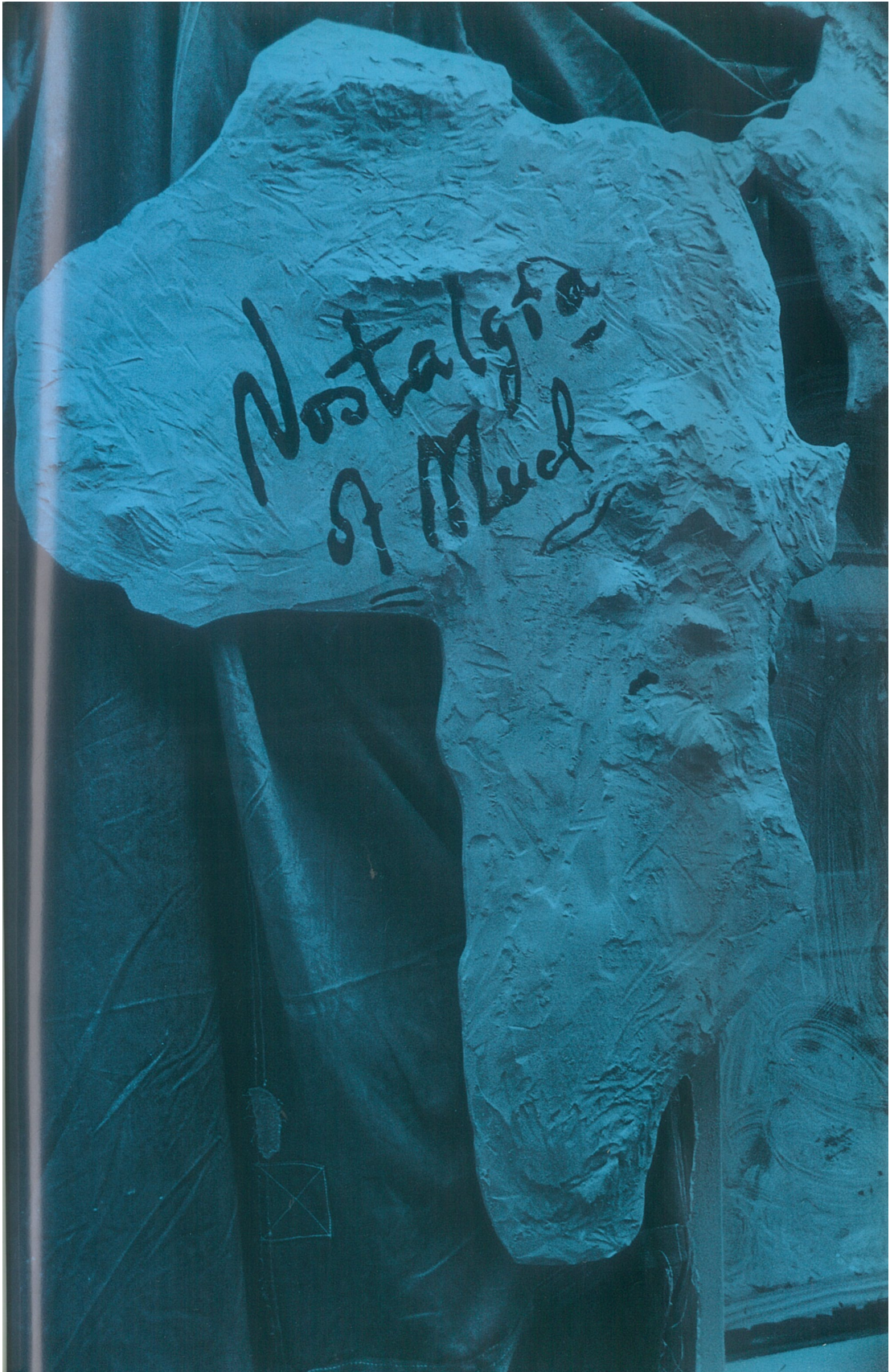
sis of the aggressively urban punk style, the most vital of punk's traits were continued. The elements collaged in punk's violent, cut-up dress style were often scavenged from the street or garbage can, symbolizing punk's emergence as a specter clothed in the detritus of society. The swaggering Pirates, the demonic Savages, the Hobos, the Witches and the Buffalos were punk's flamboyant successors, renewing the metaphor of the scavenger hero, the outlaw existing on the edge of society and feeding off it by encroaching on new territories. Tribal prints substituted for bondage. After punk's apocalypse, the spoils were the riches of the world, ideologically and culturally plundered from the history of the West and "Third World" and set magnificently in the modern city.

In the early *World's End* collections, Westwood carried over ideas from the punk movement into the mainstream. She effected the transfer begun with *Seditionaries* from the urban underground to the international fashion arena, reinforcing her continuing status as one of the most vital forces in contemporary fashion.

After a decade of post-punk, Westwood's 1987 distortions of British style, loaded with ironic references to a more glorious past and emblems of royalty (and Westwood's own public appearances



NOSTALGIA OF MUD SHOP FRONT, 1982.



sporting an ersatz crown), are an ironic echo of Punk's inflammatory contribution to the Queen's 1977 Jubilee and the upheaval it caused—the Sex Pistols' "God Save The Queen," Jamie Reid's graphic of the Queen adorned with a safety-pin, and *Seditionaries* clothing. From radical protest to ironic emulation, the clothes fulfill, momentarily at least, Westwood's aim "to make the poor look rich and the rich look poor."⁸

The overwhelming effect of the eighties boom in retail design (something akin to the growth of advertising in the fifties and sixties—design is now offered as a palliative to relieve all ills) is evident in the current soulless confusion of styles and eras. Design styles are plundered and their currency rapidly undermined by hollow replication in the mainstream. One example is the stark minimalism pioneered in shop design by the new wave of Japanese fashion designers. Today, a watered down version of that style is widely deployed by the mass-market fashion chains.

The whole idea of style-oriented retail initiated by the boutique and central to subculture's existence, the idea of creating a complete environment that embodies the message and essence of the fashion image, has been adopted as a mainstream fashion marketing technique. Like fashion itself, the shop environment evokes a lifestyle image and offers the promise of transformation.

In a culture polarized by visions of wealth and the grim urban reality of a less glorious Britain, escapism has become a national pastime. Style culture has been abbreviated to lifestyle consumerism, and shop design annexed to the accelerating cycle of consumption and disposal central to fashion and on which the modern economy is reliant

The evolution of 430 King's Road in the seventies and eighties reveals the rejuvenating role of the shop for cult style and its place as a landmark in avant-garde design—an artist's studio for the fermentation of new ideas.

NOTES

1. All quotations by Malcolm McLaren are from an interview with the author, October, 1986.

2. Mary Quant, *Quant by Quant*, London, 1966, p. 45.

3. Marshall McLuhan, "Understanding Media," Quoted by Robert Hewison, *Too Much: Art and Society in the Sixties, 1960-75*, London, 1986, p. 48.

4. George Melly, *Revolvt into Style*, London, 1970, p. 147.

5. All quotations by Vivienne Westwood, unless otherwise noted, are from an interview with the author, November, 1986.

6. Vivienne Westwood, quoted in *Fashion Guide*, London, 1978, p. 164.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Vivienne Westwood, interviewed in "The Shock of the New" by Georgina Howell, *The Times*, London, August 23, 1983.