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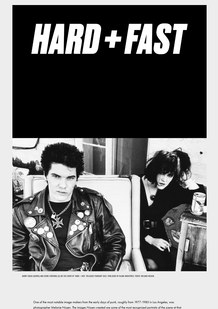
LOS ANGELES PHOTOGRAPHER MELANIE NISSEN'S 'HARD + FAST' CHRONICLES THE EARLY DAYS OF PUNK

TOM PARKER



JOHN ANDERSON, ANDREW CHERRY, ALAN SCOTT, MARK ... OF DEVO, FEBRUARY 1980, PHOTO: MELANIE NISSEN

One of the most notable modern-day photo-taking women of the early years of punk, roughly from 1977–1983 in Los Angeles, was photographer Melanie Nissen. The images Nissen created are some of the most recognizable portraits of the scene at that time, including the iconic photo of Exene Cervenka of X and Dexter Cruel of the Germs that adorns the cover of Nissen's book HARD + FAST (2020), a collection of photographs chronicling her time documenting the scene. Perhaps one reason Nissen was best known for her photographs in Dick Magazine, which she co-founded with her partner Steve Samuel (Nissen's husband at the time), was that she was the only photographer who was consistently documenting the scene around them. Nissen, whose photo-taking influences stemmed from her apprenticeship, the images in HARD + FAST, and what made the Los Angeles punk scene so special. In a time that feels so far away from the days captured in Nissen's book, these images serve as a reminder of a Los Angeles not now, / of a lifetime / every, and of a time and spirit that was likely never recognized.

Who were your influences as a photographer? Your work has been compared to that of Richard Avedon, a renowned fashion and portrait photographer. Do you see a connection there or to other photographers?

Melanie Nissen: Well, I wish I was Richard. I think it's probably about the photo that have that big black border around them. That was sort of a style I'm a while. That's dark room where I could use those borders and they looked really good. but I kind of associate that with him. The only other thing is that I love shooting against clean white. So that's another thing that I like. I don't like anything overdone, I don't like anything complicated, and I really like simplicity. And that's what I believe that. I think that is really good photography.

> **We live in a world of images, images have replaced language, have replaced reading. The responsibility to your role in history is whatever is going to happen in human beings — you can't predict what people are going to do, you can't predict what people are going to do, but since this concept is your basis, it's a camera, and it is going to record the world, it's going to record the world, it's going to explode in the world and in the children that are coming what this world was like. It is an incredible responsibility.**
>
> — Richard Avedon, from "Richard Avedon: Evidence and Light," Interview Magazine, May 1986.

I do love. Avedon has said about the subject. She, the photos don't tell the truth. It's just catching a moment that's telling a story, but it doesn't belong to either the photographer or the subject.

MN: It is just a moment. You catch somebody, and that's the end of the moment. I don't think it's always the truth at all. I think photography can be very manipulative. I think it's true to that moment.

DEVO, FEBRUARY 1980, PHOTO: MELANIE NISSEN

Why do you think there is interest in this era of punk/ music history and Los Angeles in particular?

MN: Well, because it's that was the very beginning. A lot of these photos are before bands even really played live or anything of it. This was just starting. We had been reading about the English bands that were over in London and everything, and we had only seen pictures of them. I mean, we saw Devo, Devo Samuel, and we brought all the singles we could possibly find and buy and listened to them over and over again. I think this is a time that people don't know much about it all the way, was beginning of punk and I think maybe Devo and that's what I wanted to do.

The early punk scene in LA seemed to nurture many female creatives as well as showcasing diversity in the bands and artists at the time. What attributes to this more equitable community, at least in terms of the visibility for females to create alongside their male counterparts?

MN: I don't know but it was from the get go. It was a really interesting period of time because everybody who was involved was interesting. It was, it was, it was, it

Liz Rhodes

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