SHAMANARCHY IN TH UK: THE LIFE AND WORK OF JAMIE MACGREGOR REID

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ABSTRACT
Jamie Reid (b.1947) is a British artist most commonly known as art director for the iconic Punk band the Sex Pistols during the mid to late 1970s. Drawing on a rich artistic career spanning over five decades – encompassing painting, drawing, artwork for the music industry, interior design and immersive environments – this paper aims to deconstruct Reid’s familiar identity as the graphic designer of Punk. The artist’s unique working methods will remain a key focus, detailing Reid’s development of an idiosyncratic visual vocabulary involving the reuse, recycling and transformation of a collection of techniques, visual motifs and slogans developed over the past forty-five years, many of which have been influenced by the Situationist International.

Conventional studies of Reid’s work have also tended to locate his practice, involving the use of montage and détournement, firmly within the 20th century. Despite the artist citing his ancestral heritage, particularly his great uncle George Watson McGregor Reid (1862-1946) – post-Edwardian social reformer and head of the Druid Order in England at the turn of the 20th century - as a major influence, the impact of this influence upon his practice has so far remained undocumented. This paper therefore seeks to relocate Reid’s practice within the tradition of English alternative dissent, exploring the influence of George Watson MacGregor Reid and other significant family members, as well as radical influences such as William Blake and William Morris. With the artist’s spiritual concerns being used to explore alternative directions for the future, this paper will unearth the enduring themes and concepts underlying Reid’s practice which can be said to form part of the age-old British struggle for social justice.

MAIN TEXT
Despite a rich and varied career spanning over five decades, the British artist Jamie Reid, born in 1947 in Croydon, Surrey, remains inescapably defined by his iconic work produced for the Sex Pistols during a relatively brief period in
the late 1970s. Reid is perhaps best known for his appropriation of a Cecil Beaton photograph of Queen Elizabeth II, used to promote the Sex Pistols’ single *God Save the Queen* which was released on 27th May 1977 to coincide with the Queen’s Silver Jubilee celebrations [Fig. 1].

His much-copied ransom note technique became synonymous with the band. With technological advances rendering record cover design a dying art, Reid’s Sex Pistols artwork - for example the cover of the 1977 album *Never Mind The Bollocks, Here’s The Sex Pistols* [Fig. 2] - endures as one of the most powerful signifiers of the Punk era, celebrated and fetishised by both design historians and collectors as iconic works with prices to match.

For the most part, critical analysis of Reid’s practice has lacked any significant discussion of Reid’s visual vocabulary, in which Reid’s commercial work such as his output for the Sex Pistols does not stand alone but represents part of a greater idiosyncratic artistic language or vocabulary in which certain motifs are reconfigured, reconstructed and applied in turn to new projects. My PhD thesis seeks to document this highly important aspect of Reid’s methodology. Reid’s political influences, not least that of Guy Debord’s Situationist International, are integral to any analysis of his career and have been deservedly and expertly explored by writers such as Jon Savage and Stewart Home, as well as by other conference speakers such as Ana Bastos Raposo. In addition, my 2007 MRes thesis explored the impact and legacy of the Situationist International in Britain and the U.S., with particular reference to Reid’s Sex Pistols artwork.

It could be argued that this Situationist influence, coupled with Reid’s use of montage and detournement, fixes the artist firmly within the 20th century. However, drawing on a series of new interviews conducted with the artist over the last 3 years, my paper argues that Reid’s practice as a whole is in fact the product of a range of influences, encompassing alternative belief systems and radical political views held by a number of the artist’s ancestors. As Reid explained to Jon Savage in 1987:

> Both my parents have given me so much. The whole family is steeped in a kind of spiritual socialism, and the older I get, the more I realise how much they have given and are still giving me: a love of people, especially, and their huge potential (of which we still have only an inkling) and a great love of nature and the environment. (Savage, 1987, p.7).

Reid’s skill for using design to successfully and immediately convey a political message is a recurring theme of the artist’s practice, a creative evolution which would perhaps not have been possible without Reid’s early immersion into socialism and left-wing politics through his parents John and Nora. Reid’s parents became involved in the anti-nuclear
movement, taking their sons Jamie and Bruce along to the Aldermaston marches in the late 50s and early 60s, which led to Bruce becoming an active member of a direct action subcommittee named Spies for Peace. Nora’s father Robert Gardner had a strong interest in both the Socialist movement and contemporary literature, writing a book entitled *In the Heart of Democracy* in 1909 which was published by The New Age Press, London. The book draws heavily on the themes of Christianity, socialism and the work of the American poet Walt Whitman (Gardner, 1909).

At the beginning of the 20th century, Reid’s great uncle George Watson MacGregor Reid would become enamoured with Druidism, becoming leader of the Druid Order in England in the period directly preceding the First World War. As Ronald Hutton explains, Druidism was believed to have been the ancient British representation or embodiment of the biblical concept of an original true and universal faith, a stance taken up by many 19th century writers (Hutton, 2007). The Druid faith had undergone a revival in the late 18th century. Eighteenth century scholars saw the ancient Druids as the elite guardians of an indigenous pre-Christian religion, which soon became associated with the many mysterious ancient monuments scattered around the British Isles; MacGregor Reid continued this association by choosing to worship at Stonehenge with the Universal Bond from 1912 onwards [Fig. 3].

At the dawn of the 20th century MacGregor Reid began promoting Druidism as a spiritual path that could unite followers of many faiths. As detailed by Dr. Adam Stout, the group that MacGregor Reid led, *The Universal Bond*, became a vehicle for conveying many of the ideas that had been expressed by groups such as *The Theosophical Society* and *The Order of the Golden Dawn* in the previous century (Stout, 2005). Through the Universal Bond a complex tapestry began to be woven, which drew on the inspiration of the ancient Druids, the work of the Revival Druids of the previous three centuries, the teachings of the world religions, and the Western Mystery Tradition. The group held ceremonies at Stonehenge, campaigned for social justice, and promoted the Universalist Church, which later became incorporated into the Unitarian Church. MacGregor Reid campaigned for social justice both as an individual and as a member of the Clapham Labour Party. Through his journal *The Nature Cure*, he championed an alternative lifestyle which promoted vegetarianism, homeopathic medicine and a simple, natural approach to all aspects of living (often described as ‘naturist’ or ‘simplicitarian’), at a time when such concerns were still regarded as radical, and often ridiculed.

Ever resistant to the expectations and conventions of mainstream society,
MacGregor Reid may be regarded as a countercultural icon. His refusal to pay an admission fee at Stonehenge in 1913, and his subsequent removal from the site by police could be said to echo the notorious event of Jubilee night – 7th June 1977 – when his nephew Jamie Reid, along with Sex Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren and others, were arrested as they accompanied the Sex Pistols on a trip down the Thames aboard the Queen Elizabeth (Savage, 1987). Both George Watson MacGregor Reid and his nephew Jamie Reid are individuals who can be defined by their desire to demonstrate new ways of organising our spiritual and political resources. As John Marchant of Isis Gallery explains, “It is this dialectic between gnosticism and dissent that lies at the heart of Reid’s practice and makes him one of the great English iconoclastic artists” (http://www.isisgallery.org/artists/jamie_reid.html). It is clear that this aspect of Reid’s family history offers us a new insight into the life and work of the artist.

Returning to Druidism, Much of the modern Pagan movement, including Druidism, can be said have been influenced by Robert Graves’ book *The White Goddess* (1948), which claimed to have discovered a Druidic calendar based around the cycle of nature. Graves attempts to deconstruct the earliest religions, especially those dealing with the mother-goddess and nature worship, primarily through ancient poetic stories. An early (undated) work by Reid references Graves’ book directly, and depicts the White Goddess playing the violin, lamenting the skyscrapers and office blocks of the newly-redeveloped Croydon the destruction of the natural environment [Fig. 4]. This indicates that the artist’s interest in Druidic folklore has proved integral to his practice from the beginning. As Reid explains:

> I suppose on one level there is that element in the majority of my stuff which tends to be around painting of photography...There’s an appreciation...a great element of beauty in it, just seeing the magnificence of things. And there’s obviously that other element, the political element ... I don’t see any contradiction in the two.
> (Jamie Reid in conversation with John Marchant, 2006. http://www.jamiereid.org/about/the_idle_r_article.html.).

This quote illustrates the fact that for Reid, the spiritual and the political have always been intertwined.

As Philip Carr-Gomm explains, the “wheel of existence” referenced by Graves in *The White Goddess* (1948) was developed by modern Druids into the Wheel of the Year. According to the Druid belief system there are eight festivals which divide the Wheel of the Year, each with its own celebration, with occurrences approximately every six weeks. These include solstices, equinoxes, and the four major points in the turning of the Wheel, (Autumn, Winter, Spring, & Summer). The four elements - Earth, Air, Fire, and Water - are
also celebrated individually throughout the year at the various festivals (Carr-Gomm, 2006).

These Druidic cycles are often referenced by Reid, particularly from the 1990s onwards. In 1989, Reid started on a ten year commission to revisualise and reinvent the interior spaces of both the recording and resting areas of the Strongroom - a recording studio which was opened by Richard Boote as a single studio in Shoreditch, London in 1984 [Fig. 5]. This small studio was followed by Strongroom 2, which opened in 1989. As well as being technologically ground-breaking – it was the first commercial studio to fully integrate MIDI with traditional analogue equipment – Strongroom 2 was also revolutionary in terms of its interior design [Fig. 6]. According to the Strongroom website, Boote wanted to reinforce his “passion for creating a creative atmosphere distinct from the functional approach of other studios” (http://www.strongroom.com). Reid, whom Boote knew as an associate of Malcolm Garrett’s Assorted iMaGes design studio, was brought in to inject Strongroom 2 with a colourful interior that “furthered Strongroom’s reputation for radical and innovative thinking”. After Strongroom 1 experienced a flood in 1990, the studio was refitted and Reid returned once again as artistic director, continuing and developing the theme he had established in Strongroom 2. Reid also expanded his unique vision into the Strongroom’s two other studios, as well as its leisure rooms, offices, stairwells and bar, leading to the creation of a unique, coherent and instantly recognisable identity for the studio [Figs. 7 & 8].

Reid worked on the Strongroom from 1989 to 2000, creating a vivid yet serene interior setting including murals, collages and wall hangings inspired by his Celtic and Druidic roots, centred on the Druidic Eight Fold Year. Guardian journalist Imogen O’Rorke, in her 1998 article ‘Never Mind the Pollocks...’ explains that Reid “describes the act of painting as ‘white magic’ – spreading positive vibes to the music with astrological symbols and Celtic amulets” (O’Rorke, 1998, p. 9).

Whilst working on the Strongroom interiors Reid also began to work with slate, a natural material which the artist found to have incredible acoustic and sound-proofing properties; Reid explored this further in his solo exhibition Slated, held at the Aquarium Gallery, London, in 2004 which featured a series of abstract acrylic paintings and screen-prints on slates, inspired by his travels to Ireland, Scotland and Wales over the previous ten years. Stephen Kingston describes Reid’s work for the Strongroom as follows:

Silk-screened canvasses, marble, etched bronze, and slate carry Reid’s imagery across the twenty room complex, characterised by a cacophony of colour and symbols...It is a kind of Temple to Sound, which, now completed, is a pop cultural monument for the new millennium. (http://www.chipwork.com/pages/full_bi
The phrase “Temple to Sound” is a fitting one in relation to Reid’s interior design work for the Strongroom, hinting at the artist’s desire to move beyond pure decoration and use architecture and interior design as a positive socio-political force.

Reid relates this concept back to a Situationist critique of the city, and the concept of Unitary Urbanism. In a 2008 interview he explains,

You know, a lot of that sort of initial Situationist critique, as you probably know, came out of a lot of architecture students who were very involved at the start, and it came out of that concept. If you actually look at a lot of 20th century cities, they’re all about power control and getting people to perform functions. like rats in a box really. And it could be so the opposite. Which is why I don’t see a contradiction between the spiritual and the political.

(Jamie Reid interviewed by Vicki Maguire, June 2008).

In other words, Reid argues that his preoccupation with abstract and esoteric concepts such as shamanism, astrology and magic can in fact be harnessed in order to make a practical and measurable impact on the world around us.

During the 1990s, Reid continued to work prolifically with a number of musicians and bands who for the main part have chosen to operate on the fringes of the mainstream commercial music industry, again recycling and revisualising the familiar motifs which over time have come to form part of his personal methodology as a visual artist, in order to create sleeve designs and posters that successfully convey the unique ethos and spirit of a particular recording artist. In order to achieve this Reid has drawn upon much of his Druidic and shamanic-inspired work from turned artistically soft” (Mahoney, 2001, p. 16). Reid argues otherwise; as he explains in a 2004 interview with Richard Cabut:

Magic, to me, is a matter of being practical. I mean, to try and create something with it...One example is the Strongroom, where...I’ve painted a series of big canvases using colour symbolism, astrological symbolism...I just wanted to use that element of magic, for want of another word, in a solid way, in a real situation, actually creating an environment. Over the past two millennia, architecture has attempted to dominate people, make them feel inferior, servile. I wanted to create an environment that’s an inspiration.

(Jamie Reid in conversation with Richard Cabut. http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/keep-warm-this-winter-make-trouble/).

Reid’s ideology stands in direct opposition to critics such as The Guardian’s Elisabeth Mahoney, who in her 2001 article ‘A Hippy Ending’ labels Reid’s later work as “distinctly unthreatening and trippy Celtic-tinged wall hangings and large paintings” which she finds difficult to reconcile with the savage experimentalism of the 1970s (Mahoney, 2001, p. 16). Mahoney also suggests that cynics may see in Reid’s Druidic-inspired work “yet another angry young man who has
the 1980s onwards, again putting forward an argument for the continuing relevance of his artistic practice. A reviewer of Reid’s *Peace is Tough* exhibition at the New York gallery Artificial in 1997 agrees, explaining:

I suppose it is terribly ironic and all that one of Reid’s images proclaims “Never Trust A Hippie!” but I’d much prefer Reid’s ‘backsliding’ into hippie-ish mysticism to the Sex Pistols’ head-long rush into cultural insignificance. The simple reason for this is that hippie-ish mysticism has enabled Reid to do something that neither John Lydon nor Malcolm McLaren has done since the 1980s, which is stay in meaningful touch with the politically-engaged musical subcurrents that trace their inspiration (if not their sound, look or style) to punk. (http://www.notbored.org/reid.html).

The band that Reid refers to most frequently in interviews is Afro Celt Sound System; as a result of his ten year collaboration with the Strongroom, Reid also spent five years as visual co-ordinator with the band. Formed in 1996 following a visit to the Strongroom, Imogen O’Rorke describes Afro Celt as “a fusion of Irish musicians with the Senegalese sound of Baaba Maal” (O’Rorke, 1998, p. 9). Reid worked extremely closely with Afro Celt Sound System, designing not only album and single sleeves for the band but also collaborating with them on live performances.

In 1996 the band released their first album *Volume 1: Sound Magic*, with Reid designing the album sleeve. The source for the sleeve was Reid’s 7’ by 7’ canvas *OVA*, painted in 1988. The cover was one of three works derived from earlier images produced for the Strongroom, strengthening the band’s identity with Reid’s particular brand of Celtic mysticism. The image used on the back cover of the CD booklet reclaims two animals which were appropriated by the monarchy as part of the Royal Arms. Reid’s design re-instates these heraldic ‘beasts’, re-presenting them as the symbols of Summer (lion), and Winter (unicorn) respectively [Fig. 9]. Reid designed two further album covers for Afro Celt Sound System – *Volume 2: Release* (1999) which featured the ‘starship’ design developed for the band, overlaid with the recurring motif of the Druid OVA [Fig. 10], and *Volume 3: Further in Time* (2000), which featured the ‘Axis’, a culmination of a whole year’s work centred around the theme of stars [Fig.11]. Like the cover for *Volume 1: Sound Magic*, Reid’s later cover designs were also derived from earlier works for the interior design of the Strongroom studios.

The same themes and influences are repeated in a number of Reid’s other major projects, most notably the *Eight Fold Year*, a massive body of work representing an ongoing exploration of the Druid Wheel of the Year and the four elements through a series of 365 paintings as well as drawings and photographs taken by Reid and his wife Maria on their many journeys throughout the British Isles and beyond, undertaken at various key times of year. The images range from depictions of birds, trees, mountains, rivers and the
geometry of the natural world, to more abstract motifs of primal expression and have been described as representing “Themes that resonate and echo those of William Blake, amongst others; life looked at from the cellular or organic level, to the universal and spiritual heights - themes that have occupied the human state for literally, thousands of years” (http://www.chipwork.com/pages/8fold.html).

The influence of Blake is one acknowledged by the artist, who in a 2008 interview describes the inspiration for his paintings as “like with Blake: ‘See the world in a grain of sand...’ sort of syndrome” (Jamie Reid interviewed by Vicki Maguire, December 2008). Reid also talks about the profound effect “all the Blakes at Millbank in the Tate” had on him on his first visit to the gallery as a teenager, intrigued by the mystical worlds they depicted (Jamie Reid interviewed by Vicki Maguire, June 2008). As Geoffrey Ashe explains in The Offbeat Radicals: The British Tradition of Alternative Dissent (2007), Blake’s lifetime coincided with the 18th Century Antiquarian speculation about Britain’s ancient past and the newly-fashionable status bestowed upon Druidism by 18th century scholars (Ashe, 2008). Reid picks up on this connection between Blake and the Druid Order in a 2008 interview; he explains: “That was the thing then with the Druid Order, it was very politically involved as well. It touches on such deep things in English traditions - people like Thomas Paine, William Blake...” (Jamie Reid interviewed by Vicki Maguire, January 2008). It is Blake’s combination of the political, spiritual and ecological which has proved to be an attraction for many artists, musicians and writers throughout the 20th century including Allen Ginsberg, Philip Pullman, Patti Smith, Jah Wobble and Ray Davies. As Colin Trodd explains, musicians such as Jah Wobble QUOTE “have identified [Blake] as a global spirit of the imagination, a sign of creative freedom standing outside and against all systems of authority and control” (Trodd, 2008). Jah Wobble, otherwise known as John Wardle, is a long-time friend of the Sex Pistols’ John Lydon and was the original bass player in the band Public Image Limited. In 1996 he released The Inspiration of William Blake, which featured Blake’s words against an atmospheric soundscape. The Kinks’ Ray Davies, who enrolled at Croydon College of Art in 1963 - a year before Reid – also cites Blake as a major influence, with Blake’s God Writing upon the Tables of the Covenant forming the cover design for the 2009 album The Kinks Choral Collection, featuring Davies and the Crouch End Festival Chorus.

It is this interpretation of Blake as a combination of mystical seer and anti-establishment activist that appears to have drawn such 20th century figures to his life and work, not least Reid. Reid also acknowledges the fact that the political aspect of Blake’s life...
and work has often been overlooked, stating: “That’s the thing with William Blake, you know. He’s seen as this sort of mad prophet, but in fact he was incredibly involved with all sorts of different people” (Jamie Reid in conversation with Vicki Maguire, January 2008). These included Thomas Paine, an international revolutionary seen as personifying the political currents that linked American independence, the French Revolution, and British radicalism. In Britain, Paine earned the distinction of being the most widely-read of the radical pamphleteers of the 1790s, as well as being the one whose works were most often prosecuted.

Reid appears to hold a particular interest in figures such as Blake and Paine, as well as the Romantic poets, whom he sees as having been compartmentalised by history. As he explains in a 2008 interview:

...it’s the same with what we regard as the Romantic poets, like Wordsworth and Coleridge. They were really radical people at the time. It’s so true of what history does to people though isn’t it; it just puts them in a completely different light and takes away the real situations of the times they lived in. (Jamie Reid in conversation with Vicki Maguire, January 2008).

Reid also references William Morris, stating in Suburban Press No. 1 in 1970:

William Morris could see 100 years ago a need for some aspects of technology to be curbed and others encouraged. Read his “Utopia”. He sees into a future where technology serves mankind but he also realises an environment with the spirituality of the “golden age”. The best taken from all ages... (Reid, Suburban Press No. 1, 1970, p. 2).

Reid appears to be able to identify with such figures, drawing a parallel between the narrow categorisation of their life and work, and critics’ interpretation of his own artistic practice. As Reid stated in 2006: “It’s something that I do suffer from as an artist, in terms of the people who run culture. I don’t fit into one category. I would’ve thought that the whole idea of an artist is to be expansive, like an explorer going forward. Not stuck in a rut” (http://www.isisgallery.org/further_reading/jamie_reid_the_idler_article.html).

Jamie Reid is an artist who has so far escaped classification within the contemporary art world. With a rich and varied artistic career spanning over forty years - encompassing painting, drawing, sculpture, interior design, film, immersive environments and artwork for political causes - it is clear that Reid is no longer able to remain solely defined by his work for the Sex Pistols produced in the relatively short period of 1975 to 1979; a definition I have sought to deconstruct through an in-depth analysis of the artist’s career as a whole, including key works produced from the period 1980 to 2010.

One of my key aims was to locate Reid’s practice within the tradition of English
alternative dissent, exploring the influence of George Watson MacGregor Reid and other significant family members, as well as that of radical figures such as William Blake. Reid’s interest and affinity with such individuals, along with his ongoing involvement in topical political issues such as campaigns against the Poll Tax and later, the Iraq War, embody his claim that Punk is a continuing story, illustrating the age-old struggle for social justice in Britain and suggesting an alternative reading of Reid as an artist following the tradition of British radical dissent. As the artist explained to Stephen Kingston in 2000, ...

...all that I’ve been doing is re-adapting my work from the late 1960s and early ’70s into different contexts and continuing with the same themes and messages. They’re the same messages that have been fought over for the last 2000 years, and I don’t think they will ever go away or change. You have to keep redefining them and have a go again”. (http://www.chipwork.com/pages/full_bio.html).

Reid’s heritage of Druidism and Punk is perhaps best illustrated by his cover design for the Evolution Records compilation album Shamanarchy in the UK (1992), the title of which highlights the dual esoteric and political nature of his practice and which also provided the inspiration for the title of this paper. The cover design for Shamanarchy in the UK combines examples of Reid’s iconic cut-and-paste ransom note lettering with some of his more esoteric motifs [Fig. 12]. The central image, Boudicca Rising, had previously been used by Reid on the cover for the anti-Criminal Justice Act fundraiser album Taking Liberties (1994) [Fig. 13]. One of Reid’s more esoteric images, the Astrological Clock, had previously appeared in the Strongroom, and on the cover design for Cactus Rain’s 1991 album In Our Own Time; both images had also featured on examples of Reid’s small circular slate works [Fig. 14]. Finally, the Swastika Big Ben image had first appeared on the back cover of issue 21 of VAGUE magazine in 1988 [Fig. 15].

In recent years Reid has often been criticised for placing both original works and prints on sale through commercial galleries, which some individuals may view as a ‘selling out’ of the DIY, anarchic ethos of Punk; just one example of the artist’s complex relationship with the contemporary art world. Many critics still find Reid’s spiritual agenda difficult to reconcile in relation to his involvement with Punk. However, this study has sought to deconstruct the identity of Reid as “The man who art-directed Punk”, repositioning him within the context of English radical dissent, where both aspects of Reid’s practice may be viewed as attempts to explore positive alternative directions for the future. The artist’s practice from the 1980s to the present day, particularly his painting, continues to resonate with the same themes of a desire for positive spiritual and political change, coupled with a celebration of the innate power of the natural world; themes which, in the context of our current fragile
political climate, can be said to provide
evidence of Reid’s continuing relevance as an
artist in the 21st century.

Jamie Reid’s latest exhibition Peace Is Tough will
be at Isis Gallery at The Bear Pit, Park St, London
SE1 from 27th October – 20th November 2011.
http://www.jamiereid.org/

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1

[Image of two portraits, one with the caption: Jamie Reid, designs for God Save The Queen promotional flyers, 1977. Single released 27th May 1977.]

Fig. 2

[Image of a poster with the text: Never Mind The Bollocks, Here's The Sex Pistols.

Fig. 3

[Image of a sculpture, with the caption: George Watson MacGregor Reid, and the Unfinished Demolition Stonehenge Summer Solstice, The Parking Through the Gate, 1913.]

Fig. 4

[Image of a sketch, with the caption: Jamie Reid, untitled sketch inspired by Robert Graves' The White Goddess, late 1960s.]

Fig. 5

[Image of a studio with the caption: Strongroom Studio 1.
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