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HOME & GARDEN

Anarchy Rules: The Dishes Stay Dirty

By PENELOPE GREEN JAN. 3, 2008

Correction Appended

THERE are certain things you can count on in a punk house. A killer name: Anarchtica, Scribble Squat, Collective A Go-Go, Firebreathing Kangaroo. Lots of bikes and skateboards. Homemade tattoos. A tattered photocopy of “Soy, Not ‘Oi!’,” the vegan anarchist’s “Joy of Cooking.” Guests are always welcome in a punk house, if they follow the rules: “Don’t be a jerk!” reads a guest policy sign in one.

The punk house might be a trailer, a van, a warehouse or a bus. There are lots of treehouses, and more than a few squats. The old anarchist’s dictum — all property is theft — is part and parcel of the punk-house mindset, which is lovingly chronicled in a new book of photographs by Abby Banks, a 29-year-old artist. Ms. Banks found all 42 of the houses collected in “Punk House: Interiors in Anarchy,” out last month from Abrams Image, the art and pop culture imprint of Harry N. Abrams, in the same way: by phoning a few friends.

The punk house is a curious and sometimes beautiful habitat, the expression of a music scene and do-it-yourself culture that went underground decades ago, in an attempt to opt out of just about everything that smacked of the mainstream: cities, clubs, bars, alcohol, processed foods, agribusiness and the record companies, for example, not to mention all media larger than a photocopied zine. With its roots in old-fashioned counterculture communes (like Findhorn in Scotland, but really messy, and with a thrash-hardcore beat), the punk house is a multifunctional dwelling: typically a place for like-minded males in their 20’s to live and to make and

hear music. This is not to say that there aren't all-female punk houses (there are) or ones with girls living among the boys. As with punk itself, the punk house eludes a tidy definition. "Punk Is (Whatever We Made It To Be)" is the title of a song from the Minutemen, a punk band in the early '80s.

As Thurston Moore, a member of the art-house alt-punk band Sonic Youth, who helped Ms. Banks find a publisher for her work and contributed an essay to the book, said recently: "It's just a completely liberated aesthetic."

You won't find many punk houses in major urban areas because, as Mr. Moore explained, "you don't go to the media eye of New York or Los Angeles to achieve success." Furthermore, it is nearly impossible to live a punk life in areas with costly real estate.

Bands on tour don't play gigs at the Meadowlands or even the Knitting Factory; they're more likely to appear in basements and living rooms. There's a preponderance of acoustic guitars: big amps might spook the neighbors.

Mr. Moore's own successes are more commercial. In his essay for Ms. Banks's book, he writes of his experience walking into a legendary punk house in Minneapolis wearing a nice winter parka and sneakers, whereupon he was promptly sneered at. "I didn't know they let subversives in here," sniped one resident wearing a leather jacket stamped with the Dead Kennedys logo.

Though she was once in a thrash-punk band called Vomit Dichotomy Ms. Banks has never lived in a punk house, but she has an enormous appetite for the aesthetic. "It's self-expression in the living space, not just on their bodies," she said, noting that punk-house interiors are logo-centric. As with T-shirts or tattoos, they contain lots of writing — hortatory, descriptive, diaristic — on walls, door jambs, stoves and toilets.

"I'm so goth I'm dead," is inscribed on a wall of a punk house in Minneapolis. "Dead witnesses tell no tales," is on the back of a toilet in another.

Ms. Banks grew up in a tidy 1920s bungalow in Claremont, Calif. Her mother is a city planner; her father a psychology professor and an aerobics instructor who was seriously into all kinds of music, including punk. "It was more than acceptable in our

house to blast the Ramones,” she said. Ms. Banks’s own room was embellished with layers of stickers, fliers for shows, and blue paint. When she sent her mother a copy of the book, Ms. Banks reported, “she said, ‘Every room looks like your room!’”

She’d always made art but never a photograph, until one day after art school, when she had an epiphany. She’d been drifting, she said, working as a maid and dog walker for David Foster Wallace, who lived two blocks away from her mother’s house in California. She had friends at The Fourth Street House, a punk house in San Pedro. There was a show there one day; dueling bands were playing the kitchen and the living room and passing the mike back and forth.

The house was about to be sold, and its distinctive flourishes — the casket outside, the skate ramp out back — dismantled.

“I wanted to document it before it went away,” said Ms. Banks, explaining that despite their hoary history, many punk houses are ephemeral. “I just think they’re really important and beautiful. For some people it will be their lifestyle forever, but for others it’s just a phase.”

She called upon an old band mate, Timothy Findlen, and they embarked in Ms. Banks’s maroon Ford Ranger on a three-and-a-half month road trip.

The Ranger is an art project in itself, layered with stenciled images of figures impish, historical and arcane, like Herman Munster, Anne Frank, and one Mr. Findlen made of Harry Smith, the music ethnographer, mystic and Bohemian who died of natural causes at the Chelsea Hotel. As they toured cross-country, Mr. Findlen would play shows, and Ms. Banks would take pictures. They brought house presents — a case of wine, Two-Buck Chuck, from Trader Joe’s, and a box of silk-screen T-shirts with the slogan “I’d Rather Be Dumpster-Diving,” made by a friend of Ms. Banks.

When those offerings ran out, Ms. Banks said, “all we had was to be nice” — and the offer of Mr. Findlen’s dish-washing services.

The ephemeral quality of punk houses became clear a year after the photographs were taken, when Ms. Banks returned to her subjects with

photographic release permission forms from her publisher. Many of the houses were gone, she said, resulting in a scramble to find the former residents.

Last week, Andee Grrr, a 28-year-old zine writer now living in Brattleboro, Vt., described her three years at one of the oldest punk houses in Ms. Banks's book, the 309 House in Pensacola, Fla. (It was so old, Ms. Banks said, "there were fliers on the wall for shows the year I was born," 1978.) The house was a clapboard five-bedroom bungalow with a fluctuating number of residents and one "filthy, filthy bathroom." The rent for each member was \$25.

Ms. Grrr, like most of 309ers, volunteered at the End of the Line vegan-punk cafe across the street, living on her tips. Food was mostly free: bread from a bakery Dumpster and vegetables from the supermarket's Dumpster. "The good part was there was always someone to talk to if you were feeling bad," she said. "I developed some really strong friendships. And the rent was so low we didn't have to work much. I could write a lot. The bad part was no clear boundaries." And the aged scurf of the house, which she said was dirty to the core. "It was kind of a hopeless situation." Generations of punks, she said, had lived in that house.

"I thought of calling the book, 'No Lease,'" said Ms. Banks, who herself lives without a lease in Brattleboro, part of an art collective called the Tinderbox that's nestled into a cavernous old dance studio. The difference between an art collective and a punk house, she explained, is that in the former you're pretending you don't live there, and in the latter you're pretending you don't make music there. The rent is \$1,000, which Ms. Banks collects from her studio mates (there are about 20, living and working in rooms called Shantytown and Vegetable Street). When the rent collection comes up short, they have a show, Ms. Banks said, or sell T-shirts.

"When rent is cheap or free," she said, "it leaves time to make art or travel." Ms. Banks, who has a wide-open face and a keen eye for the life-force inherent in the making of art, takes inspiration from the photographs of a train-hopping friend, Mike Brodie, who goes by the name the Polaroid Kidd and is a kind of Nan Goldin to his train-hopping, punk house set. Ms. Banks's eye is intimate, to be sure, but her pictures are sly and funny. And despite the profound grunge of the punk-house milieu, her photos are never tragic: they reveal a focused, almost manic energy, like a

straight-edge song.

That the idea of the punk house endured for so many years is heart-warming to one 40-year-old former punk house resident. Joel Olson is now an assistant professor of political science at Northern Arizona University. Back in the day, as he put it recently — which is to say from the late 1980s to the mid-90s — he was a zine editor and the author, with Jack Kahn, of the “Soy, Not ‘Oi!” cookbook, copies of which Ms. Banks spotted in every house she visited. His Hippycore Krew House in Tempe, Ariz., had Green Day perform in its living room, as well as a “lot of malnourished vegan punks,” he said.

Being a vegan, as he pointed out, was nearly a punk given, a political act against industrialized agriculture and pro-animal rights, “but it was hard work.” In those pre-Internet days, he collected recipes from punk pen pals. They printed 2,000 copies, and sold them all. (A few years ago, AK Press, a radical publishing house, approached Mr. Olson for the rights to reprint his book, and it is now available at Amazon.) “I’m glad the punk house is still thriving,” he said. “It makes perfect sense for young people who don’t have much money and want to make music. The downside is that it seems to me punk culture hasn’t really evolved or developed.”

Certain icons, however, have endured, like the punk bathroom. Perhaps the greatest, said Mr. Moore, was the be-stickered, be-flied and graffiti-emblazoned black hole in the basement of CBGB, the legendary (and now defunct) punk rock club in the Bowery.

“That’s the one thing that sears itself into your memory,” said Mr. Moore, breaking his reverie. “It’s that toilet.”

Correction: January 10, 2008

An article last Thursday about communal or “punk” houses misstated the university affiliation of Joel Olson, a former resident of one such house. Mr. Olson is an assistant professor of political science at Northern Arizona University, not Arizona State University.

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