

SOUVENIR

Marc dances towards us, along the tracks, past the crew, out of the clever-a-go-go Pop art world of the video, and, we surmise, into the endless romance of the sleazy city's seedy streets . . . To where?

Tottenham Court Road III – Going Underground

Let us pretend that Marc Almond has danced right off the video wall in the Virgin Megastore, this cold and damp late afternoon in November 1982, and out of the store and across the eastern end of Oxford Street to find himself beside the small newsagent and tobacconist's stand that in those days was set into the wall beside the entrance to Tottenham Court Road Underground station. Here he would have to Keep Left as he danced down the dirty steps towards an odoriferous curve of subway that leads to the central booking hall, ticket barriers and escalators of the station.

MICHAEL BRACEWELL

In grimy old London he was making a journey, as it transpired, from post-punk to postmodernity. Had he continued, and ascended a further short flight of steps, he would have found himself in another, darker subway, far more odoriferous and much frequented by homeless people, in which was located one of London's few gyms. This being the winter of 1982, the times are still pre-body-consciousness, as well as pre-digital and pre-ironic. Even Soft Cell's cover of 'What', however artfully styled and recast for electro-dance, comes across as glorious Pop homage as opposed to arch pastiche.

Emerging the other side, on the eastern side of Charing Cross Road (home, then, to St Martin's School of Art, artist-polymath Derek Jarman, and Ian Shipley's art history bookshop, whose window display for Jarman's film diary and memoir *Dancing Ledge*, in 1984, will resemble a Neo-Romantic Voodoo Shrine, replete with human skull), Marc would be facing the old

SOUVENIR

Astoria theatre – soon to be refurbished as a thriving music venue – and standing with his back to New Oxford Street, a block northwards of which stood the Y.M.C.A. . . . in the basement of which new industrial noise assault bands, the electronic avant-garde and occultist funkateers such as Throbbing Gristle, S.P.K. (aka ‘System Planning Korporation’/‘Surgical Penis Klinik’/‘Selective Pornography Kontrol’) Cabaret Voltaire, This Heat, Lemon Kittens, Clock DVA, 23 Skidoo and Rema-Rema could be discerned in the darkness.

But at this time, in this part of London, quite suddenly, it feels as though the very atmosphere in the streets is about to break free of what seemed to be the monotony and chill of the late 1970s. A glance at the television adaptation (like the *Megastore*, made in 1979) of John Le Carré’s novel of late Cold War espionage, *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, is coldly articulate of the capital’s atmosphere and appearance – an ill, exhausted meanness – in the year Margaret

MICHAEL BRACEWELL

Thatcher was elected prime minister.

Cambridge Circus appears almost as run-down, surly and sourly populated as the Eastern European cities that the British spies of Le Carré's 'Circus' are infiltrating; professional men of early middle age look prematurely aged, saggy jowled, hyper-tensile; their lumpy-haired juniors gone to seed already.

A shot of two suited men talking in a poorly lit government office looks like a bad photograph of a painting by Francis Bacon: dun and cream; light bulb dimly pinkish gleaming; intimation of mean frame of office cubicle; male humans as though twisted and crippled inside.

And beyond? Fags and instant coffee; tepid alcohol – the stale taste of too much; boxy brown cars, crimson flock wallpaper; rain; depressing dessert trolley; bottles of gold top. And so it was.

By the same token, the London streets on which the first two seasons of Thames

SOUVENIR

Television's *The Sweeney* were filmed in 1975 seem in the clutches of an older era still – a worn-out shot at modernity in the midst of urban dereliction; menace or boredom like stagnant pools; Transit vans and watery Scotch, broken-down tower blocks, ripped-out bathroom fittings, dripping lock-ups and bedsit art nouveau – the ubiquitous corrugated iron fly-posted with (for instance) announcements for 'An Evening with Fripp and Eno' at the London Palladium, and Welsh rockers Man at the Roundhouse.

D.I. Regan and Detective Sergeant George Carter race across weed-choked Dockland to the melancholy sun-flooded ruin of a soot-blackened warehouse, open to the elements, left by time's tide. Beneath an immensity of sky, out of breath, gasping, bent at the waist, beaten, scowling; '*cocky bastard nonce . . .*'

Now, in the late autumn of 1982, there is a sense of a change. Something to do with electronics and digital technology; with new

MICHAEL BRACEWELL

politics, new money, and the consequences, among other things, of a comparatively trivial event such as punk.

Here is the presentiment of a new world rising against an old world, beyond the frozen landscapes and scratchy singles in picture sleeves, and despite the loathing of most punk-era musicians and artists for the new Conservative administration (and most vehemently, for the figure – one might suppose the actual body – of the prime minister herself). Now, beyond the bleak midwinter, something is shifting . . . The bright shops, the quickening city . . .

Back to Marc Almond, therefore, who could have danced to the electro-pop beat on his Walkman through the tube station booking hall, slid down the handrail of the steep escalator, done a neat about-turn and found himself facing the beginnings of an extraordinary work of contemporary art, conceived and commissioned likewise in 1979, but,

SOUVENIR

due to its scale and ambition, a while in the making.

Hitherto, the subways, hallways, stairwells and platforms (and Tottenham Court Road station, where the Northern Line and Central Line converge, seems more labyrinthine than most) had always been dank and bland, Orwellian, faintly threatening, a punk-electro-pop backdrop if ever there was one. Now, these same walls are being gradually covered in a vivid and complex mosaic: in places there are seemingly abstract patterns; elsewhere, objects, people, animals, activities, events are depicted, like futuristic pictograms on the side of a spacecraft.

The tens of thousands of individual tiles – each little bigger than a postage stamp – have a smooth, lustrous glaze that seems to both soften and define their colours. Walking on, you might further imagine that you are exploring an archaeological site of the distant future; as though artist craftspeople of the

MICHAEL BRACEWELL

year 5000 had created a set of richly coloured mosaic murals depicting how they imagined quotidian life in London over three millennia earlier – before an apocalypse, perhaps, that all those industrial-noise bands like S.P.K. and T/G and Rema-Rema had somehow, psychically, picked up on but been unable to prevent.

Designed by the Scottish sculptor and artist Eduardo Paolozzi, and installed between 1982 and 1984, the mosaics at Tottenham Court Road tube station (like those in the entrance hall of the National Gallery, just down the road, where we find in the illustrious throng of British modernist heroes and mystics, Churchill defying the Devil, and Dame Edith Sitwell representing the Sixth Sense) will become curiously overlooked during the next thirty years – their familiarity, perhaps, rendering them invisible.

But in November 1982, the colours are fresh and alive: on the Central Line westbound platform, for example – red, yellow, purple,

SOUVENIR

pink, aqua, leaf green, wood brown, on a silvery, bone-white background; such vivacious colours (reminiscent of the psychedelic animation of The Beatles' third feature film *Yellow Submarine*, made nearly fifteen years earlier) yet here and now resembling primitive pixilation – *patterns beyond Pop* . . .

Abstract panels overlay geometric shapes in dizzying tessellations; then we see saxophones (a nod to the old Soho jazz clubs), a mask, a cross section of a human head, ditto a machine; then a bomber, a bull, a butterfly; a modern man (casual clothes) striding into his day; the totality of the ceramic-pixelated patterning reminiscent once again of an arcade video game, machine-like, vaguely electronic, laboratory-like, modern urban tribal: a premonition of the coming post-Pop, Computer-Caffeine-Commuter Age, when worker citizens will travel wired, dressed in militarised sportswear with their coffee and technology.

As Paolozzi is credited with being one of the pioneers of British Pop art, in the very

MICHAEL BRACEWELL

early 1950s, so here, therefore, he seems to envisage an evolutionary jump, where Pop – its vivaciousness, machine energy, wit and urbanity, its domestic familiarity with trademarks and products and mass culture – becomes something consequent not just on the electrical and the mechanical, but the digital.

His murals share a frequency with Soft Cell's cusp-of-the-computer-era update of 'What' (Pop art styling for post-pop people); with Walkman stereo cassette players (the first headphones widely worn publicly, for personal music on the move); with the burgeoning, almost postmodern Beat Boom revivalism taking off a block away in old Soho; with the new technology gadgets in the flourishing electronics shops on the Tottenham Court Road in 1982 . . .

. . . with the dawn chorus 'style' culture of cool design; '*liplicking, unzipping, Harpers and Queens . . .*' sings elegant Martin Fry, that same year, on the epoch-defining, orchestra, funk

SOUVENIR

bass, sleigh bells and Fairlight CMI-boosted album *The Lexicon of Love* by his group ABC – a former Sheffield post-punk reborn in a Billy Fury, Elvis-by-way-of-Birkenhead gold lamé suit; with the video age; with change in the air – the faintly freshening breeze.

Marc Almond, meanwhile, is an artist, like Eduardo Paolozzi is an artist; like all artists he has things to be doing, and a restless energy to live with. He dances on, to ancient concerns such as those engaged by Cocteau and Genet and Lorca, having made the depiction of the new electronic-digital world a more thrilling place with his presence.

And we had all been finding our way to the station.

*Subways and platforms, suburban trains and
'Metal Box': first week of January, 1980*

White sky, white fog at frozen midday; the white of strip lighting encased in shallow planks