Boot Boyz Biz (BBB)

Boot Boyz Biz is a "research and production worker cooperative" founded by Kevin McCaughey, which collectively designs and proudly self-produces bootleg T-shirts as a form of creating and disseminating research. The shirts, whose subjects range from Cocteau Twins to "Cybernetic Serendipity," Roland Barthes to Björk, are covered in obscure graphics and dense typography creating layers of connection and meaning. The intricate designs require reading rather than viewing, challenging the conventions of graphic shirts and pushing the limits of traditional bootlegs. Since its inception, the brand has evolved to incorporate elements of politics, education, and spirituality, reimagining the potential of bootlegs as a form of "education through images." Interview by Ben Schwartz (BS).

BS: Could you talk about the beginning of Boot Boyz Biz? What inspired the project, and what was your relationship to bootlegs at the time?

BBB: Experiences that built a base for our practice today were percolating long before we formally start-

ed the project. I can trace BBB's beginning to a triad of formative phases: 1. File Sharing, 2. Punk Tees, and 3. Artist Books.

The bootleg impulse first revealed itself to me while I was learning the dark art of CD burning in middle school. Getting hooked on making and trading mixes anticipated the kind of "mixtape mentality" or "dragonfly eye" that guides our ways of seeing today. The mix as an object has utility in the discovery of new tunes, but it also sparks intense perceptions of time and place stemming from the context of the exchange. The mixtape "event" integrates the material and immaterial as memories are burned onto the disc, as are mp3s, making for a complex aesthetic object (basically space-time travel) and an important component of convivial cultural exchange.

More early obsessions with music led to online activity: creating Blogspot "music blogs" and using the p2p network Soulseek, opening the door for experiencing new modes of infinite free exchange. By excavating well-organized folders on Soulseek, you could find shortcuts into expansive music histories, while peeking into a specific user's library revealed a kind of world-view in mp3s.

Meanwhile, offline, my closet was increasingly corresponding to my iTunes collection. Most of the short-lived 1980s punk/hardcore bands I was into never had real merch, so it was up to bootleggers to fill a void as demand increased from an accelerated (re)discovery of relatively obscure music, partially due to file-sharing culture (big up ebay user: negativereinforcement and eatdeath.com). Tees and punk (or any music/subculture) are seemingly forever symbiotic. Tees satisfy an individual desire for unalienated belonging while simultaneously preserving and

reproducing the scene itself. The internet eliminated dependency on local shops, exploding choices and access to symbolic capital. I learned from digging for boots online that a shop's stash of commodities (online or IRL) becomes doubly useful as an encyclopedia, where each tee becomes a visual-mnemonic fragment that maps onto a larger landscape of underground music.

Tees get more interesting at gigs where they act as foregrounds and backgrounds for the show. Their collective formation in space makes a visible soundtrack, bridging the historical and present through a shuffling inventory of shirt-signs. The temperament of any gig correlates with what tees are present—forming constellations of meaning and tension. Often revealed by the tees, the most memorable gigs show an amorphous unity of differences (see: Chaos in Tejas 2011) opposed to ones clearly bent toward a single ideology. This best vibe is brought out by bands with diverse ranges of influences or gigs booked with eclectic lineups where contact with the other is built into the program. More than a fruitful blueprint for curation, the lesson is that by fostering a diverse range of inputs, the potentials increase for creating new meaningful connections. This ideal translates into how we assemble topics and ideas for BBB collections today.

Studying graphic design brought awareness to punk's earlier 20th-century analogs found within the historical avant-garde, where, like punk, new collective consciousness was fostered by modes of radical making focused on transforming images of everyday life into new critical forms. Dada montage and constructivism added a historical spark to the cut and paste fanzines I was grinding out at Kinkos late into the night. The

historical trail illuminated more evidence: Breton's "one publishes to find comrades," clandestine activity in "samizdat" publishing, non-linear storytelling in *Medium is the Massage*, the deconstructive "book in a box" *Aspen* magazine, the convivial correspondence in 1960s Mail Art, and potentials of the collector in Ed Ruscha's artist books. These historical images screamed almost explicitly "bootleg" as they used assemblage with emphasis on the public-making "multiple," revealing strategies for inquiry-based projects that now leave an invisible ink on our work.

These histories initially inspired a fervor of (mostly non-serious) Riso publishing activity (produced under the moniker Nonporous) from around 2013–2016 — concurrent with the excitement around Printed Matter Art Book Fair stuff. Then it became clear that tees (totes too) and books were becoming increasingly symmetrical as desired objects in the zine scene. Tees reward a more instantly gratifying cultural capital to the buyer and give an economic boost to recoup the low-margins in publishing, but they're often designed as a modest supplement or a means to an end. Then we thought: if tees provoke a heightened desire, instead of using them as bait for getting eyes on zines, why not make the tees the zines themselves? By taking the industrious reproductive activity of the risograph into the realm of screen printing tees, the task was then to pack as many ideas into a T-shirt as we would into a sixteen-page zine, merging the means and ends into a single cohesive expression.

Through understanding the value of open cultural exchange within a DIY ethic, and possessing

p. 203: Boot Boyz Biz NYC Earth Art T-Shirt (2019)

knowledge of radical publishing strategies, we were able to lay the foundation for the project.

BS: How do you decide what to bootleg? What variables are you conscious of when making bootlegs: i.e. power dynamics, different cultures, economies, contexts, etc.?

BBB: Above all we boot what charges us up, what expands our understanding of the world, and what gives us courage to continue creative work. Instinctively it's a matter of real-recognize-real. When you find something that moves you emotionally or intellectually, there's an impulse to pass it on. Think of Newton's Third Law but with ideas. Competitive ideology suppresses the urge to share what's valuable and Web 2.0 exploits it while trivializing it. Our process starts by collecting material that makes us move, then it becomes a matter of mapping the personal onto our larger social context. We're always seeking the largest overlap between what we like and what could be useful to the widest range of peers both today and for posterity. The task is to create value by filling gaps.

We adopt a rhizomatic temperament permitting us to wrestle with multiplicities of form and thought throughout history—an inverted version of the "lifestyle" concept. The output of most brands appears as a single homogenous "totality," where our individual projects each contain unique heterogenous *totalities* within a constraint of the 16×20" printing pallet. This freedom of thought (onto a limited space) gives us a large scope to organize and put history in motion. We

p. 204: Boot Boyz Biz Riso Gocco hat (2022)

look to historical flash points across all disciplines that reveal moments of counter-hegemonic rupture. By capturing sparks from the past we hope to energize the present. What kind of sparks? Ones that advocate for free, meaningful activity within communities, and ones that help us unravel the psyche of history. Our project aims to bump threads and keep ideas at the top of feeds. We can only change the world if we increasingly understand it together.

We think: What stories do we need to vitally argue for today? What thinkers might be just below the surface to a large group of people? Are we being constructive towards an open and collaborative society by nudging specific topics? What pathways are available to make a potent idea both legible and complex? Do we have enough understanding to effectively translate an idea?

We boot what others won't. We know there's inspiration tucked away in remote institutions/disciplines that have potential to benefit a wider audience. We try to demystify these ideas and reverse radical monopolies. Alternatively, we like fishing out ideas baked into pop-culture that are often missed or dismissed. Magic happens when these high and low worlds bump into each other, and we're especially drawn to ideas that dance between both.

We have principals that draw from a common sense "boot-code" (i.e., considering out-of-print status, if sources are living or dead, active or inactive) but we deliberately stretch its limitations (mostly in terms of accepted form and selection) because we believe the task of any new generation is to make traditions anew. We use this instinctual compass while keeping in mind the explicit (but somewhat slippery) Fair Use doctrine, giving us a benchmark for producing transformative

works. Fair Use favors the usage of fragments from existing works, and we find a home in these fragments which we can salvage from relative obscurity. When we put fragments in careful sequence, we can correlate stories using image and text in kaleidoscopic form, inviting opportunities for discovery, new appreciation, and increased subjectivity. What is inquiry-based visual communication if not criticism, comment, reporting, and teaching?

We acknowledge the very real tension between a co-optive, cynical "booting from above" and a supportive, convivial "booting from below." We associate with the latter as our practice has stayed DIY and independent from the start, but that fact alone doesn't automatically clear one from doing damage. Bootlegging becomes dangerous in two main ways: banalizing and occulting. Banalization happens by fetishizing history, reproducing stereotypes, atrophying memory by distilling it into rigid icons, calcifying thought (think Che tees or any tees that prioritize appearance over substance). We fight this by arranging constellations of unusual images that crisscross disciplines and timelines, exploding history into pathways that require deeper readings. Instead of worshiping history, we put it up for question. Occulting practices take historical images and re-mystify them devoid of context and history, for sole aesthetic benefit of the occulter, resulting in a less legible and mystified environment. While we let graphics on our projects speak for themselves, we combat occultation by presenting extended roadmaps of our research, showing our hand and leaving the puzzle pieces that make up our work open to all, to promote expanded inquiry and meaning-making. Booting for us is not an act of enclosure but a gesture of "giving-on-and-with" (Édouard Glissant).

As we've become more popular, we've oriented ourselves deeper and deeper into the cracks of history for insights for material, because honest bootlegging can't be a day at the beach. We push ourselves to up the level of visual transformation by syncretizing increasingly disparate-but-connected elements, so that a design is never about only one thing. A tee becomes a cosmology, a salad of pictures, and a web of knowledge with multiple entry and exit points into enriching stories.

The topics, ideas, and images we engage with are priceless, what you're paying for is our labor to organize and produce the things and keep it going. Material growth isn't part of the program.

BS: How has your understanding of a bootleg changed over the course of the project? It feels like very early on, the project was a more traditional form of bootlegging (thinking here of the one-off music related shirts). Recently it retains those elements of fandom, but the releases are pushing the potential of what a bootleg can do or be—resurfacing ideologies, educating, et cetera. I am interested in this evolution.

BBB: Yeah in the beginning the main influence was punk boots so there was little constellation going on. the tees were standard fare often about one thing. Back then even imagining a non-music boot on a colorful blank felt sacrilegious! But once you sidestep dogma and try something new and actually it hits…. going back feels increasingly one dimensional.

P. 209: Boot Boyz Biz O(+> / Prince T-shirt (2019)

2015–17:	Bootlegs are a personal, social tool
2017–19:	Bootlegs are a personal, social, educational tool
2019–21:	Bootlegs are a personal, social, educational, political tool
2022–??:	Bootlegs are a personal, social, educational, political, spiritual tool

Our oscillation of research and production continues to propel us in unexpected directions. Now might be approaching a point where it's a misnomer to call what we do bootleg. The word mainly indicates our departure from punk bootlegs, but we've since gone through a transformative turn (bootlegs-without-boot-legging?). The project has become more complex and hard to pin down over time because of a few things:

1. The topics we wrestle with often make use of in-tertextual strategies themselves (sampling, collecting, montage, publishing, et cetera) across all different disciplines (film, philosophy, music, et cetera). So as we continue to learn from our "bootleg ancestors," it gives us the courage to push and experiment.

2. The embracing of a "horizontal montage" design strategy in order to converge aesthetic, intellectual, political, and spiritual energies together like a time-lapse photo. The comprehensive strategy aims to bridge languages to show a bigger picture. We try to work this into objects (when the space affords it!) and have it shine through the "group" style presentations.

p. 210: Boot Boyz Biz Koyaanisqatsi pants (2019)