



This session is about graphic intervention, or how designers critically redress the social, political and cultural grievances of the day. You will meet Robbie Conal, an artist/activist who uses poster sniping – the illegal posting of missives in public spaces – as a means to attack government's fallibility. And Teal Triggs and Sian Cook of Women's Design + Research Unit who use design as a polemic tool in various ways. I'm here to give an overview of graphic dissent and offer a few comments on the here and now.

After 9/11 there was a moratorium on all loyal opposition.

Understandably, even the most trenchant satirists were not certain how to balance the enormity of such a tragedy with their right (and responsibility) to critique official policy.

When I asked a very well-known political cartoonist how he was reconciling critical instincts with patriotic emotions, he said he was temporarily shutting down.

In the aftermath of 9/11 we heard that irony was dead; and we saw unambiguous heroic realism of a kind not seen since World War II had returned.

Yet while we mourned the dead and celebrated the heroes, some of us – perhaps many of us – had a disturbing sense that not just irony but dissent was falling victim to fear, AND that the powers here in Washington would somehow exploit this opportunity to promote political and social agendas that will have repercussions on many of our lives.

Indeed President Bush and his circle have benefited from the timidity of an opposition that has yet to separate the taboos imposed by the 9/11 tragedy from the everyday exercise of power.

Bush's policies are certainly not beyond criticism or satire. And while he has earned some stature under fire, he continues to the same agenda that he pushed when he ran for the presidency. While we cannot return to a pre-9/11 world, our leaders must still be held accountable for their actions. And this is the role of graphic intervention.

BUT what is a graphic designer to do?

Admittedly, our interventionist powers are limited though not insignificant.

For example, during the dark days of the last presidential election the only bright light was on the computer screen. Internet sites and email queues were flooded with gifs, stuffits, and jpegs of digitally manipulated graphics skewering the presumptive president-elect for his real and imagined deficits.

Despite the two candidates' lack of vigor during the main bout, between rounds an energetic digital leafleting campaign goosed the body politic.

Well, at least this body's politic.

For me, these digital communications continued the tradition of satirical cartooning and protest-poster sniping that has been the basis of visual polemics since the Reformation. Owing to the current widespread use of digital cameras, Photoshop software, and Internet communication a new era of visual hijinx was launched with George W. Bush as its virtual poster boy.

Out of respect, I'll lay off the President for now. But I can't resist showing this *Nation* cover.

On a personal note, I have been interested in graphic intervention ever since I was a kid. In fact when I was ten years old I worked at the John F. Kennedy election campaign headquarters in New York City. Basically I stuffed envelopes at main headquarters but after hours I took it upon myself to mosey on down to Nixon's headquarters where I'd grab armfuls of Nixon leaflets, then took out my magic marker and defaced his humorless face then distributed them to passersby.

What I learned stayed with me a lifetime. I carried on subversive activity eight years later when, during my last year in high school, I became a cartoonist and art director for underground newspapers.

Underground is, however, something of a misnomer since most of these newspapers were openly sold on newsstands. I was art director of the *New York Free Press* and contributed drawings and layouts to *The East Village Other*, *The Rat*, and *Avatar*. *EVO* was artsy and cultural with political undertones, *Rat* was SDS-oriented until a radical Feminist group took it over. And *Avatar* was connected to a pseudo-religious hippie cult with socialist aspirations. But all addressed the zeitgeist in one-way or another, and the zeitgeist was political.

The hot button issues in the 60s were the Vietnam War and Civil Rights, which inspired countless graphic responses like these. (SHOW) Prior to the buildup in Vietnam and during the early stages of the civil rights movement, it was not easy to express and distribute oppositional political messages.

Remember, the nation had just emerged quite scathed from the McCarthy Era and was still reeling from an ongoing Red Scare, which was as close as we came in postwar years to the repression of free speech.

In the early 60s, the national media was limited to three major networks, daily newspapers were either democrat or republican, and access to the masses by an opposition was severely limited. In this proscribed environment politically and socially alternative graphic art was one of the few means of addressing audiences. And to grab their attention, these works had to not only challenge the status quo, they had to kick it in its ass.

In the 1960s the new Left pushed the boundaries of propriety through two magazines: *Ramparts* on West Coast and *Evergreen* on the East. These were clarions of a new aesthetics, politics, and morality. *Ramparts* was the voice of the political left and *Evergreen* was the soul of the cultural left. The former exposed CIA involvement in American colleges and universities,

the latter revealed the taboo side of the American subculture. In terms of design these were not the 1960s versions of 1920s Constructivist, Futurist, or Dada manifestoes, both *Ramparts* and *Evergreen* followed conventional design verities – and legibility was the supreme virtue.

It was too easy for the mainstream to discount alternative media as representing a lunatic fringe. So the goal of these magazines was indeed to subvert the culture through an air of professionalism. The significance of *Ramparts* and *Evergreen* to design history as conduits for various graphic ideas that challenged politics and culture.

Indeed publishing this draft card burning cover made the *Ramparts* staff vulnerable to federal prosecution.

Another example of intervention was George Lois's covers of *Esquire*. Here he used a mainstream men's style magazine to shoot off blasts from the political canon with covers that skewered Richard Nixon, Racism, and the Vietnam War. Given that this was an advertiser supported, "establishment" publication, it was remarkable that Lois (thanks to the power of his editor, Harold Hayes) was able to make some of the most profound graphic statements of a generation.

The Underground press, however, had no desire to be professional-looking. In fact, it would have been the kiss of death. Its young constituents would have rejected every hint of status quo. The underground was, in fact, a spontaneous combustion of mostly urban middle class kids and young adults against a power structure that included their parents and surrogates.

The undergrounds challenged propriety through word and picture. Written and visual obscenity was a lethal weapon.

Historians often compare the Underground press to Futurism and Dada, the radical anti-art and political movements of the teens and early 20s. Yet few involved in the Underground Press were familiar with these art movements. The Underground editors and artists intuitively used cheap layout and printing technologies to communicate efficiently and immediately. Nonetheless, a relationship did exist, if only as a comparison in hindsight that reveals a rhetorical continuum throughout the 20th century.

The radical Leftwing periodicals published in Germany between World War I and the advent of the Third Reich, were exemplary for their marriage of polemics, art, and design. That these publications failed to prevent Nazism is endemic to the limited power of any small-scale press facing the immense apparatus of government. Nonetheless, marshalling the talents of committed writers, artists, and designers, the German Left wing press attacked political foes with all the intellectual weaponry at its disposal.

The Malik Verlag, a Berlin-based publishing house, was headed Wieland Herzfeld, John Heartfield, and Georg Grosz. In 1916, with Germany in the throes of war, Herzfeld assumed editorship of the anti-war arts periodical *Neue Jugend* (New Youth) to publish the work of "those who have encountered opposition [to their political ideas] and lack of understanding by the public." And it was the wellspring of leading German progressive authors. After a few

issues it was officially banned for its seditious editorial policy -- a few months later it defiantly resumed publication as a four page broadsheet-size format. The first issue was comparatively staid, the second was designed by John Heartfield with typography inspired by Futurism.

Another paper titled *Jedermann sein eigener Fussball* (Every Man His Own Football), became one of central documents of Berlin Dada. The front page of *Jedermann* includes one of Heartfield's earliest political photomontages, a fan with the silhouetted heads of German leaders superimposed upon it, which was a facetious call for a beauty pageant of government and military men. Inside, a banner headline read: "Revolutions are the Locomotives of World History."

Germany was a petri-dish of critical culture, but Russian revolutionary graphics before after 1917 also exerted a huge influence on both the language and style of graphic design. The Revolutionaries understood that agitprop, including posters, movies, and railway trains, were key in swaying a largely illiterate populace. Typically, the graphics in the service of revolution were proscribed by the scarcity of paper, ink and type. They were often printed from stencils and displayed in the windows of telegraph and post offices. These window graphics were hybrids of comic strip and cartoon known as ROSTA, and were an effective means of communicating a narrative.

Photomontage was another propaganda tool. Manipulating the photographic image not only provided a melodrama, it enabled the propagandist to trifle with truth in an impressionable way. Ultimately, however, the Revolution became a state, and the state became a reactionary Soviet regime. By the late 1920s, the revolutionary visual language, Constructivism, was denounced for having hidden agendas.

This revolutionary style aesthetic permeated the Sixties underground -- which is not to say that all political graphics were derivative of Russian, Dada, or Surrealist art. But there was a spiritual link to revolution in these art forms and their successors. In addition, and no less important, technological considerations influenced the essence of political graphics.

Two factors contributed to the plethora of printed material: Inexpensive offset lithography and Xerox technology.

Offset lithography provided groups and individuals with limited resources the ability to produce newspapers, magazines, broadsheets, even cheap posters on inexpensive papers and with numerous colors. As primitive as it was then, photocopying brought the cost down even further and increased the ability of grass roots groups who did not have design knowledge or skill to reach the public with small bills and leaflets. Eventually "Quick Copy" stores offered even greater opportunities as you will see in the next generation of political graphics.

Throughout the 1970s social discontent continued, fear of nuclear war increased, racial strife escalated, and the environment took center stage.

Also Reaganism was not just a callous response to the needy, it kicked off the age of the greedy.

Sue Coe's images at this time reflected, if not dramatically foretold, the growing economic divides. While so-called ruling class indifference had been a recurring theme in Coe's work it acquired considerably more resonance when AIDS and homelessness entered the middle class's reality. Coe was not a household word, but her work was becoming more compelling to those who yearned for alternative points of view.

By the 1980s Ronald Reagan's official indifference to social need trickled down to poor communities everywhere. The result of a decade of Conservative ideology and liberal inactivity was a growing underclass. Responding to local health, housing, and economic crises grass roots graphic groups emerged in urban areas throughout the nation. Artists and designers not only protested against national indifference but found the means to help their communities. Graphic guerrillas shot off countless paper bullets in battles against an enormous variety of social problems. The evidence can be found in any city where posters and leaflets are hung.

When the AIDS crisis reached epidemic proportions during the late 1980s -- when the death toll became comparable to that of a war, and almost everyone began to know someone touched by the disease -- public awareness of guerilla graphic art on this and other ills increased. Agitprop groups like Gran Fury and Woman's Health Action Mobilization employed conventional and unconventional design methods to stimulate awareness. Posters were found on traditional venues, including on buses, bus shelters, and billboards, but massive sniping offensives were also carried out on the streets. The AIDS and pro-choice campaigns marked another renaissance of visual protest.

And so did the Gulf War. George Bush Sr's attack on Iraq was met more or less favorably in the United States, in part owing to the specter of Saddam Hussein, in part because of the tight news strictures that allowed CNN to broadcast live pictures from Bagdad under fire, but restricted all other war news, which effectively lulled the public into a sense of security. The opposition had a tough time being heard, but graphic artists and designers returned to the copy-making machines to produce reams of protest material.

The question for many of these artists was not whether Saddam was evil or that occupation of Kuwait was immoral, but WHO WAS GETTING HURT by the war? The imagery asked, and in some cases answered these questions.

Throughout the 1980s, the street was the main stage for oppositional activity. The street, and by that I mean all outdoor, public forums, is routinely where any opposition carries on its campaigns. In recent years "culture jamming" or ad "correcting" has become the term most applied to ambushes on mass culture. Activists have co-opted billboards, transformed logos, and laid siege to World Trade Organization meetings.

Many artists and designers engage in this, and Robbie Conal, has become its master. He calls his art "infotainment." However, Conal is a trickster who sees his job as the subversion the status quo. A dada concept if I ever heard one.

Likewise, Barbara Kruger is not a commercial artist, per se, but she is a graphic designer who exemplifies the continuum of activist designers

Renegades like Kruger, use the language of commercial art to make critiques of gender, racial, cultural, and economic stereotypes promoted by mass media. Kruger embraced graphic design as a component of her art. And thanks in large part to her accomplishment, the definition of what art is has changed during past twenty-years to include virtually any imaginable medium.

Well, I promised that this talk would not be entirely about Dubya. But as the second President of the Internet Age, opposition to him represents the next evolutionary stage in political art. Bill Clinton was the first President to have his personal affairs "outed" on the Internet. Dubya is the first to be ridiculed via email.

Immediately after the ballot controversy, a flurry of copies of the problem form and a few homemade comic parodies hit the e-waves. It was fast but not orchestrated. Actually, the majority of today's virtual leaflets are resolutely ad hoc with most of them produced by amateurs and few professional graphic designers.

Given the availability of sophisticated software and the need to maintain a level of unpretentious simplicity, the professional and amateur approaches are usually indistinguishable.

One specimen sent to me a week before the inauguration is this **word-play** produced by a designer who will remain nameless. But as a good e-sniper he sent this to thirty friends and acquaintances on his personal email list. Thus the chain began.

In addition to receiving this original mailing I also got the same attachment from two other sources, each showing between thirty to fifty names in the "send to" fields. Add to that the forty or so names that I forwarded to on my "intimate friends" mailing list and the resulting number of recipients is fairly sizeable.

Considering that at least half of those recipients are likely to forward it to their respective e-lists, exponentially the potential distribution over the course of a month is large. As the election debacle raged this scenario was repeated over and over.

Digital leaflets are not in the same league as the artfully caustic graphic commentaries of the past like these two classics. **[show pieces]**.

But they do serve to "out" political folly by ridiculing those in power. Sure, the anti-Bush leaflets tended to be more pranks than searing exposes yet taken en masse, like any effective advertising campaign, the cumulative effect of these digital leaflets in the public's mind reinforced the perception of Bush's natural shortfalls.

The Internet is terra firma for the exchange of meaningful and trivial ideas. It is also a hotbed of anonymity, the attacks are hit and run, so attempting to track down the originators is usually futile.

The new technology has breathed life into the venerable art of alternative satire. Okay, digital leafleting may not change the world -- and design intervention can be more decisive -- but it has opened a channel to be indignant.

Now let me introduce. . .