

26 WAYS of THINKING ABOUT A GRAPHIC ADVOCACY POSTER

by MATT SOAR

Looking through this new collection of political graphics, one is struck by the endless visual invention of designers in addressing pressing social issues: the exploitation and abuse of women, gays and lesbians, children, political prisoners, migrant workers, the poor, and animals; the consequences of devastating earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis and oil spills; the righteous defiance of the Occupy movement; remembrance of 9/11; global warming vs. alternative energy sources; the second Gulf War; the death penalty.

Do any of them move you? If you had some spare banknotes in your back pocket, which cause would you support, based on what you see and feel as you flip through these posters? This cacophony of urgent voices, all vying for your conscience, and perhaps a piece of your dwindling disposable income, has been collected together to present a snapshot of graphic advocacy posters *at this moment in time*.

My own thinking about this subject led me to several competing, sometimes contradictory, arguments about political posters. So, rather than attempt to reconcile every facet of this complex medium of communication into one coherent essay, I cheated—by making a list, instead. Here, then, is an eclectic *abécédaire*: twenty-six somewhat incommensurate ways of thinking about graphic advocacy posters.

Altruism An act of selflessness for the benefit of others, without promise or expectation of a reward. It's been noted often enough that altruism is not the opposite of egotism so much as a very close relative. What about graphic designers who want to do the right thing? Is it less than altruistic to think about entering a successful political poster for an award? Is it egotistical to conceive of the task in hand as an opportunity to help others, to raise awareness for a cause, but also for professional advancement?

Bourdieu, Pierre A gifted sociologist who explained the stability of social class as a consequence of the exercise of taste (or lack of it). For Bourdieu, designers inhabit a niche in the middle class that he labeled the 'cultural intermediaries'. One expression of our unifying tastes, aside from clothes, friends, furniture, and leisure pursuits, is books. Especially books about design, or by designers, or on posters. See also **Sontag, Susan**.

Commodification The way in which all cultural artifacts in Capitalist economies are inevitably understood, sooner or later, as things to be bought or sold. Examples include classic posters associated with eminent designers and studios—some of them political posters. See also **Bourdieu, Pierre; Sontag, Susan**.

Digital Dark Age A phrase that strikes fear into the hearts of archivists worldwide, and should really horrify anyone who uses a computer for their creative work. A printed poster or photograph will still be around for decades (and decades) to come, but what of posters like these that were largely 'born digital'? Can we say with any certainty that those hi-res tifs, or pdfs, or work files will be readable, navigable, or even *locatable* just five years from now? Here's one important reason to celebrate the fact that the 'end of print' never really arrived: books like this one, documenting outstanding political graphics, will surely be around long after we've finally figured out how to get around in the Dark.

Efficacy Wherever they're encountered, and understood, political graphics dramatize the issues they address: in the street, in a portfolio or gallery, reproduced in media coverage, passed around as a potential meme on a social network such as Facebook or Tumblr or Pinterest. The best also elicit identification and empathy for the groups, issues, or causes being highlighted. This must surely be the first step in actually promoting (or provoking) change through design. But can we measure such change? Does it matter? Is it enough that the designer or art director *meant well*? See also **Qualitative vs Quantitative Evidence**.

Format All the posters in this collection *look like posters*, be it portrait or landscape, but how long will this traditional print format make sense as the default for political graphics? Over the last decade we've seen this dominant format challenged in many ways, from Jumbotron and iPod screens to website banners, interactive Flash sites, desktop images, mobile apps, and screensavers.

Graphic Design It's worth noting the distinction to be made between the DIY tactics of untrained individuals and groups and the interventions of professionals: the people who call themselves graphic designers, artists, or illustrators, whose work graces these pages. Here, the reader won't find any evidence of improvised flyers or hastily inked protest banners, regardless of how incisive or witty they may have been in the moment. See also **Tactics**.

Humor & Horror Is there any right way to communicate a pressing social, cultural or political issue? Political graphics run the gamut in terms of the emotions they portray and those they attempt to elicit: outrage at the continuing erosion of women's reproductive rights; revulsion at the plight of birds caught in avoidable oil spills; sympathy for the victims of the Haitian earthquake and its aftermath; sadness about the victims of landmines; anger at the unforgivably slow response of FEMA in the wake of Hurricane Katrina; curiosity spurred by Eric Benson's retro 'green' homages to the posters of the Rural Electrification Administration.

Ideas Is a particular poster a triumph of style over content? If there is an idea in there, is it appropriate—or just clever? Can a visual pun change minds, or save lives?

Judgment In selecting the posters reproduced in this collection, the curator has inevitably also rejected many, many others. As banal as this observation is, it nevertheless raises important questions about the decision process involved in assembling a coherent group of posters for a book or a gallery

show or a website. What aesthetic, political, cultural, and professional values are expressed and affirmed in making each selection, from an ocean of competing possibilities? See also **Bourdieu, Pierre**.

Knowledge What does the audience *already know* when it encounters a political poster? Does the poster add new insights or information; restate the facts persuasively; appeal to the rational self, the ego, or the emotions? Can a political poster provoke a true epiphany; or, is its function merely to amplify or affirm what we already felt or suspected?

Location, Location, Location? We live in an era when the myriad surfaces available for 'wild' postering seem to be on the decline, at least in the West. If it's hard enough to gauge where, and for how long, a poster has appeared in a physical location, how on earth do we measure the reach of digital posters? Are 'Likes' on Facebook, or traffic to associated websites, or cellphone shots of posters *in situ*, enough to figure out how effective a poster has been? In this frame, winning an award may be the only way to guarantee measurable exposure.

Mood What's the collective level of awareness of the issue at hand? Has the subject been burned onto our collective retina through repeated, vexed media exposure, or is it a fresh horror in dire need of attention? Just how much explaining will our poster have to do? See **Knowledge**.

Negativity Is it better to portray the positive consequences of social change, or the negative fallout of doing nothing? See also **Humor & Horror**.

Observation The most elegant posters in this collection depend in large part on the ability of their creators to represent people, animals and objects clearly and with great visual economy. Note, for example, the use of silhouettes by Marlena Buczek Smith, Michael Thompson and Methane Studios in their renderings of Haitian children; Eduardo Barrera Arambarri's marvelously vivid feathered wing, dripping in oil; or the efficient illustrations of hands, birds, and bears throughout the catalog.

Politics My research over the years suggests that graphic designers are overwhelmingly middle class and liberal-to-progressive in their politics. The problems addressed in this collection, from global warming, union and women's rights, to pacifism and poverty, are a coherent smorgasbord of issues dear to many progressives. Put another way, even one single poster promoting gun ownership, or against abortion or immigration or gay rights, would be entirely out of place here, however 'artful' it might look. See also **Bourdieu, Pierre**.

Qualitative vs Quantitative Evidence If we're being presented with an argument, rather than a straight emotional appeal, how is it being made? By reliance on a 'for instance', or on numbers, perhaps? The posters by Savas Cekic, Pekka Loiri, and Harry Pearce, for example, include small panels of quietly devastating information, data that quantifies their visual flourishes with hard numbers.

Resistance The well-meaning but relatively ineffectual cousin of *tactics*. There's a world of difference between blindly pushing back and actively attempting to undermine a powerful foe using an alternative political vision. See also **Tactics**.

Sontag, Susan 'Posters: Advertisement, art, political artifact, commodity', is an indispensable essay written by Susan Sontag in 1970 for *The Art of Revolution*, a collection of Cuban political posters assembled in partnership with Dugald Stermer. In it, she makes a number of insightful arguments about their history, uses, and meanings: "the Cuban posters reproduced in this book...are now cultural objects, offered up for our delectation," to an audience that has been, "lulled into thinking that it is learning something, having its commitments and sympathies extended." See also **Bourdieu, Pierre**; **Commodification**.

Tactics vs Strategies In his influential book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau famously distinguished between the *strategies* of the powerful (the government, the establishment, corporations), and the *tactics* of the relatively powerless and disenfranchised. Political posters like the ones in this collection are by definition tactical attempts to disrupt, however momentarily, the (un/conscious, ideological, hegemonic) *strategies* of those in power.

Universality Does the poster address a local, regional, national or international issue? Are its motivations or language obscure to outsiders, or does it speak to universal values? Can an argument that relies for its efficacy on the particularities of a specific place also speak to the entire world?

Ventriloquism* Every time a designer elects to create a poster for a particular social group, they are also presuming to speak on behalf of that group, perhaps using its habitual ways of speaking, its values and tastes, as well as those of the poster's audience. See also **Taste**.

Wit See **Humor & Horror**.

Xenophobia A hatred of foreigners. One among many odious and irrational fears designers have attempted to combat through their political graphics. Examples of phobias implicated or directly addressed here include: homophobia (Maziar Zand); gynophobia (Julia Thomas, Mona Goudarzi, Mohammad Sharaf, Sebastian Kubica); racism (Anita Wasik, Anthony Nagy). See also **Politics**.

Yearning It has been the intense, focused desire of everyone whose work appears in this book to speak out on an issue: to be heard; to create awareness; to effect positive change. In making graphic design their medium of choice, they have reaffirmed a collective faith in the power of visual communication.

Zeal The righteous, focused energy that leads some designers to produce searingly insightful, consequential political graphics. Equally capable of driving designers to create wrongheaded, misinformed, inappropriate or plain embarrassing posters. See **Judgment**.

Thanks to my good friend Peter van Wyck for the idea of collecting together a series of insights about political protest in the form of an abécédaire. *Vive les casseroles!*

*The insight about design ventriloquism stems from personal conversations with AnneMarie Dorland (née Ennis).