Designer as Author Activist: A model for engagement

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Abstract

Public discourse has long been enlivened by graphic designers who harness their creative skills and ideas to political, social and cultural issues. Iconic examples populate the canon of American graphic design history over the past century: designs for the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s and '40s, Lorriane Schneider's 1967 poster "War Is Not Healthy for Children and Other Living Things," Gran Fury's AIDS awareness campaigns during the 1980s, and carrying the concept into the new millennium, Shepard Fairey's recent "Obama Hope" posters.

However, historical emphasis has often been on the individual design artifact, with secondary consideration of the contextual milieu for its creation and implementation. A third consideration must be acknowledged to arrive at a more comprehensive idea of how and why graphic designers create works outside of the typical client-designer relationship. Design authorship suggests such a model.

Theories of design authorship, first developed in the mid-1990s, help to define a new paradigm for designers' enlarged sense of agency. Partly enabled by technological advances (desktop computers, printers, Postscript® software), partly by the convergence of discursive methodologies (image-making, designing, writing, publishing), and partly by the influence of avant-garde philosophies (post-modernism, post-structuralism, deconstructionism), a more holistic breed of designer emerged.

The 'Designer as Author Activist' doesn't just design the occasional protest banner – she infuses her practice with ethical and moral concerns. As this paper will show, the history behind this symbiosis of form, content and intent is not merely one of styles and trends, but of a fundamental shift in design's core.

Keywords: design authorship, graphic activism, history, politics

"What is the relationship between form and content, particularly in political poetry?" – Walter Benjamin

Benjamin's question, asked in 1934 of writers, can be applied to graphic designers who author their own messages – verbally and visually – in the service of political change and social justice. Besides the relationship of form and content in designer-authored work, this paper will examine designers' motivations and intentions – why do they engage the public with their designs, and what outcomes do they desire?

Theories of design authorship, first developed and debated in the mid-1990s (Burdick 1995 & 1996, McCarthy & de Almeida 1996, Rock 1996, Lupton 1998, Poynor 1998), help to define a new paradigm for designers' enlarged sense of agency. Prior to this era, however, public discourse had long been enlivened by graphic designers and visual artists who harnessed their creative skills and ideas to political, social and cultural issues (McQuiston 1993 & 2004). Besides a critically informed practice combining writing, designing and self-publishing, designers as authors have engaged the public through self-initiated, rhetorically-charged, cause-related messages over much of the twentieth century and into the new millennium. (McCarthy 2010, Triggs 2009)

Historical emphasis has often been on the individual design artifact (McQuiston 1993 & 2004, Glaser and Ilic 2005), with secondary consideration of the contextual milieu for its creation and implementation. Additional considerations must be acknowledged to arrive at a more comprehensive idea of how and why graphic designers create works outside of the typical client-designer relationship. (Soar 2002).

Partly enabled by technological advances (desktop computers, printers, Postscript® software), partly by the convergence of discursive methodologies (image-making, designing, writing, publishing), and partly by the influence of avant-garde philosophies (post-modernism, post-structuralism, deconstructionism), a more holistic breed of designer emerged as a result of design authorship's tenets. To examine the intentions and motivations of designers who initiate their own messages, rhetorical aspects of communication must also be considered, as "the degree of authorship in graphic design is expanded when designers have the ability to negotiate discursive functions into carefully re-examined expressive patterns and graphic mediums." (de Almeida 2009: 192)

Acknowledging the shifting creative and intellectual territory of graphic design, with its attendant economic, professional and cultural implications, one can view politically engaged work as a natural outcome of the increasingly wide reach of design in everyday life. It is understandable that progressive designers want to merge form and content into a more holistic message of their own authorship, becoming architects of their future.

Some voices in mainstream graphic design, however, cannot conceive of design authorship's intellectual reach, and how it might challenge, or peacefully co-exist, with conventional practice. Dmitri Seigel, in critiquing a film by artist, designer and educator Elliot Earls, wrote:

> *"It no longer seems quite as audacious for a designer to make a movie. Instead it raises questions like: Has the dominance of the "designer as author" model transformed graphic design into a vague form of cultural production?; and, Is the allure of the legitimacy of authorship pulling design away from the defining characteristic of the profession — the designer/client relationship?" (Siegel)*

That design needs a client is a common fallacy. Design needs content, and design needs users (readers, a market, an audience, etc.), but the message content, including entrepreneurial ventures, can equally come from the designer herself.

Design authorship can be a reaction to a perceived problem, or the proactive stance of identifying an opportunity. (McCarthy 2001) To present examples of these approaches, two case studies are used – the first as an example preceding awareness of design-authorship, the second, post-awareness. One embodies a linear, asynchronous communications trajectory, the other a lateral, synchronous quality; one serves primarily as monologue, the other dialogue; one espouses idealism, the other realism.

Lorraine Schneider's 1967 print Primer (popularly referred to by its text "war is not healthy for children and other living things") and Shepard Fairey's 2008 Obama Hope poster will illustrate the model. They represent two different eras of political activism, and employ different strategies of rhetoric, media, process and dissemination. Both are iconic works of design authorship – for different, perhaps even opposite, reasons.

Each artifact can be identified with its designer, its author. But by applying Walter Benjamin's 'the author as producer' and Roland Barthes' 'death of the author' models, as well as contemporary research into design authorship, we can see how the posters acquired their own cultural identities separate from that of their creators, while also allowing for intellectual attribution beyond the designer-authors.

Benjamin asserted that authors aligning their production with proletariat class struggle would lose their autonomy, but gain a politically correct position. (Benjamin 1934) Barthes went further by arguing that the consumption of a text by a reader signifies the demise of the author; as a scriptor, the writer merely channels language that is interpreted by readers. (Barthes 1967) Substitute designer or artist for author and graphic image for text, and the principles still apply.

Lorraine Schneider's Primer, originally a four square-inch etching created for an art contest, was produced in response to the Vietnam war. The image features a coarsely rendered black flower illustration with an orange inner disk on a yellow background. The words "war is not healthy for children and other living things" are crudely, yet planfully, squeezed between the stem, leaves and the poster's edge. More lettering than typography, the hand-drawn lowercase letters seem familiar and non-threatening. This naïve graphic approach makes the image appear intentionally child-like and innocent, while the high contrast color palette suggests urgency.

Exclusive rights of reproduction were given to the Los Angeles-based Another Mother for Peace organization, founded in 1967, which used it for a variety of graphic purposes: cards, buttons, stickers and posters. A Mother's Day card campaign to members of the US Congress helped establish Primer as an icon of the anti-war movement and led to world-wide recognition. Primer's message was eventually translated into twenty languages and royalties from sales earned hundreds of thousands of dollars for Another Mother for Peace. (Silverton 1971)

A mother of four herself, Schneider was motivated by her own history of supporting progressive causes (Heller 2005) and by the growing distaste Americans had for the war claiming their sons, brothers and fathers. Due to the success of Primer, Schneider was invited to speak at the League of Nations in Geneva, Switzerland in 1972:

> *"This is a very rewarding moment for me. I never dreamed that my modest little etching would turn into a huge banner. It is also an unusual position for me to be in because, as you know, most artists work in contemplation and solitude. ... It is very hard to talk about art, how one creates something, where do I begin – with my anger, my pain, my concern for the children of Vietnam, for my own children, for all children. What could I do, what could one person do." (Schneider, S. 1974)*

This passage reveals Schneider's temperament as an artist – personal expression, subjectivity and interior motivation were mobilized by her emotional response to the Vietnam war. The amplification of her authorial voice is acknowledged: small to large, personal to public, yearning to fulfillment, and private anguish to a politically engaged catharsis.

Besides Schneider's appeal to a moral justification, another aspect to her indignation was the fact that private companies were using the Primer image without permission from, or compensation for, Another Mother for Peace. Schneider stated, "It makes me terribly angry that people are making a profit in the name of peace." (Silverton) Perhaps this makes an unintentional reference to the military-industrial complex dedicated to prosecuting the war, while also foreshadowing future activists' unease with corporate power and the commodification of political dissent. (Frank and Weiland 1997)

The success of Primer in achieving global recognition and mobilizing women against the war was more serendipitous than planned. It was the right image at the right time in the right place, created by someone inexperienced with large-scale graphic endeavors. The campaign promoting it may have been as important to its success as the icon itself. "War is not healthy for children and other living things" was a sentiment that many could empathize with, and because it was designed by a woman and promoted by Another Mother for Peace in an era of women's political and social ascendency, it also contributed to the feminist movement.

Shepard Fairey created the Obama Hope poster in 2008, an American election year; it depicts a stylized illustration of Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama's face with the word "hope" set beneath it in a bold sans serif font, all caps. (The first version said "progress.") The poster's palette is a bright red with dark and light blues on a tan background, a twist on the typical American flag tri-color – patriotic but not simplistic. While favorably received by the Obama campaign, Fairey was not commissioned or paid to design the original poster.

Prior to the Hope poster, Fairey had already established a reputation as a street artist and designer of niche cultural graphics – his Obey Giant graphic campaign is ubiquitous world-wide through a viral distribution system, where local supporters reproduce, occasionally alter, and post the design. Showing a close-cropped stylized image of pro-wrestler Andre the Giant's face, with the word "obey," the graphic campaign mocked governmental, institutional and corporate control while employing the same strategies of global branding schemes. That most of its posting was done illegally, freely and without central planning, is its own political statement. (Banksy 2010)

When Fairey designed the Hope poster, he was already adept at manipulating the environment graphically, at harnessing the modes and media of visual communication, and at eliciting public responses – both positive and negative. Fairey's obeygiant.com web site has this tagline: "Manufacturing Quality Dissent Since 1989." He was also highly polished at his craft as an illustrator and graphic designer, with numerous industry awards, museum and gallery exhibitions, and speaking engagements.

The Hope poster builds on an iconographic vocabulary in art and graphic design – and in journalism and advertising – of the heroic figure gazing towards a promising future. (Craven 2009: 646) The origins of this propagandistic look can be traced to various roots, but an oft-referenced work is the 1967 Che Guevara poster by Irish illustrator Jim Fitzpatrick, created the same year as Primer. An image that has transcended culture, geography, epoch and its original meaning, the Che portrait is now a commodity of t-shirt shops around the world. Once identified with Marxist revolutionary ideals, the icon now represents vague notions of an assimilated counter-culture.

Fairey's Hope poster does not hide this influence – rather, it harnesses it. The use of flat colors, graphic shapes translated from photographs of the subjects, similar compositions and figure/ground proportions, and the faces' solemn, upward-focussed expressions contribute to an obvious comparison.

Fitzpatrick's high contrast Che image was based on the famous Guerrillero Heroico photograph by Alberto Korda, official photographer of Fidel Castro. Because Cuba didn't subscribe to the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works at the time, Korda's photograph has been widely reproduced and used as the basis for derivative works. (wikipedia.org)

The photograph that Fairey used as the basis for his image of then-candidate Obama was made by Associated Press photographer Mannie Garcia in 2006. While the tonal qualities of the photo have been flattened and contours of the face simplified, Obama's likeness is faithful to the original picture. For this reason, and the fact that Fairey did not request permission or pay a usage fee, AP threatened to, and eventually did, sue Fairey for copyright violation. (Garcia also sued AP, claiming he, not the media company owned copyright to the photo; this case was dropped by Garcia, whom AP maintained shot the picture under a 'work for hire' agreement.) (Delahoyde 2010)

Fairey countered the threat with his own lawsuit, claiming that his appropriation of the image was legitimate under statutes of the Fair Use clause of the US Copyright Act, which states these limitations of exclusive rights, hereby constituting fair usage:

> *"1. the purpose and character of the use, including whether such use is of a commercial nature or is for nonprofit educational purposes;*
> *2. the nature of the copyrighted work;*
> *3. the amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the copy-righted work as a whole; and*
> *4. the effect of the use upon the potential market for or value of the copy-righted work."*
> *(Copyright Law of the US 2011: 19)*

To this list, the Stanford University Libraries' Copyright and Fair Use resource adds a fifth factor: "Are You Good or Bad?" This invites ethical and moral consideration of the author's intentions. As many Fair Use cases are legal grey zones, determined subjectively by mediation or a judge and jury, it's an important, albeit ideologically shifting, consideration.

As the Fair Use clause is meant to protect works of commentary, criticism and parody, one must ask to what degree the Hope poster comments on, criticizes or parodies the original photograph, or the content thereof. Because criticism and parody connote a negative approach, a conceptual degradation of the original, commentary seems the obvious choice: Fairey's motive is to support the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States of America, and an enhanced, more heroic rendering of the image will help achieve this goal. Fairey stated: "I believe with great conviction that Barack Obama should be the next President." (http://obeygiant.com/headlines/obama)

Walter Benjamin wrote: "What we require of the photographer is the ability to give his picture the caption that wretches it from modish commerce and gives it a revolutionary useful value. But we shall make this demand most emphatically when we – the writers – take up photography." (p. 230) Fairey figuratively 'took up photography' when he appropriated Garcia's picture. The 'caption' is the word 'hope,' but also Fairey's creative process and the poster's larger political, economic and cultural context. "The work [Hope poster] pays stylistic homage to past technologies of political art, pointedly emphasizing the craft of the screened reproduction in a current state of affairs in which the dream of technological and economic progress is no longer politically tenable." (Cartwright and Mandiberg 2009, 174)

Another interpretation to the notion of Fair Use 'commentary' can be offered. Because of emergent issues in intellectual property, ownership, copyright, patent law, and so on – much of it promulgated by globalism, digitization and dissemination on the World Wide Web – Fairey's appropriation itself may be considered an act of graphic activism, as it takes a critical stance. He committed a small crime for the sake of the greater good; he 'took from the rich and gave to the poor.' This assertion is, of course, debatable on many levels, but it's germane to the role of the designer as author in political discourse and public engagement.

Rather than pitting the creativity and rhetorical intentions of one artist or author against another (Fairey versus Garcia), Fairey can be seen to act against the institutional interests of a media giant. While the Associate Press is a "not-for-profit news cooperative" (www.ap.org) its clients are global mainstream media. One critic of copyright's purposes maintains that: "...copyright was never primarily about paying artists for their work, and that far from being designed to support creators, copyright was designed by and for distributors – that is, publishers..." (questioncopyright.org/)

The case between Fairey and the Associated Press has been settled out of court, with each side asserting its claim of righteousness. From a statement on obeygiant.com:

> *"The two sides have also agreed to work together going forward with the Hope image and share the rights to make the posters and merchandise bearing the Hope image and to collaborate on a series of images that Fairey will create based on AP photographs. The parties have agreed to additional financial terms that will remain confidential."*
> *(http://obeygiant.com)*

This compromise seems to reinforce the cliché that 'it's easier to get forgiveness than permission.'

While Fairey's authorial role was less pure, and perhaps more sophisticated – or at least more complicated – than Schneider's, the role of the audience complicates Hope even further. As a work of propaganda, even if relatively benign and aspirational, Hope has inspired its own appropriation. Numerous parodies countered the pro-Obama sentiment of the Hope poster: Republican Sarah Palin with 'nope,' former president Bill Clinton with 'grope,' the Catholic Pope with 'pope,' Obama smoking with 'dope,' a montage of Obama and Che with 'viva!' and possibly the most offensive remix, a lynched Obama with 'rope.' Fairey even repurposed his Hope poster for the Occupy Wall Street movement, using the Guy Fawkes facemask common to street protesters. The Hope poster has become a dialectical device, copied by admirers and ridiculed by critics. It has entered the national consciousness; it's memetic.

The appropriation and reappropriation of Hope can be seen as a collective act of activist authorship. "If we look back historically collectives tend to emerge during periods sis; in moments of social upheaval and politic often forces reappraisals of conditions of production, reevaluation of the nature of artistic work, and reconfigur and political institutions." (Enwezor, 2004)

A commissioned version of Hope, remixed with collage elements and configured large-scale, has been acquired by the Smithsonian Museum's National Portrait Gallery in Washington, an institutionalization of an image born in the street. In a nod to Hope's political, rather than its artistic merit, the director of the National Portrait Gallery Martin Sullivan said, "Shepard Fairey's instantly recognizable image was integral to the Obama campaign." (www.npg.si.edu)

Affirming the notion of authorial commentary, is Marita Sturken's observation:

"What is potentially more dramatic about the entry of the Fairey poster into the Smithsonian collection of patriotic art is its deployment of image play that borders on irony. On one hand, the poster is clearly an effective affirmation of the then-candidate and his message of hope and change. On the other hand, its aesthetic of referencing and image play also creates an ironic subtext. It is safe to say that the style of irony has had no history in official American patriotic culture." (Sturken 2009: 170)

Adding to the possibility of irony is the notion of criticality. Although he was referring to photography's content and context, artistic configuration and the reflective role of the viewer, Clive Dilnot's comments can apply to Hope: "Only in this way in fact can image *be* political in the critical sense. For the critical requires that thought – a perspective, in the political sense of the term – be inserted into the image; that the image steps back from charm or semblance and addresses itself to what is absent in the situation with which it engages." (2010: 20; emphasis is original author's)

Fairey's Hope poster is collectable high art and populist street graphic, worshipped in some camps and reviled in others, concurrently signified and signifier. In his essay The Death of the Author (as Producer), John Stopford wrote, "In the age of commodity aesthetics, nothing is more urgent than a political conception that can also appeal to and hence organize the anonymous alienation of the modern sensibility." (p. 190) Whether or not Hope acquires the distorted meaning and commodity status of the Che icon remains to be seen.

Unanticipated in Benjamin's 'author as producer' and Barthes' 'death of the author' is the multiplicity of authorship made possible by digital media and contemporary discursive practices. While Schneider's Primer was linear, monologic and embraced idealism, Fairey's Hope is lateral, dialogic and engaged in – some might argue embroiled in – in *Realpolitik*. Both posters are products of their times, and both employ design authorship; Hope, however, is emblematic of the complexity of the now-porous relationship between author (artist, designer, photographer), idea, image, message and audience.

Schneider and Fairey made their political convictions public through activist design authorship. Their graphic forms gave voice to content that shaped popular opinion and behavior. The position that design needs to liberated "from under the thumb of content" (Rock 2005) adheres to conventional disciplinary segregation and hierarchy. It is amoral in a world where politics, design, ethics and morality collide.

Referring to the desired outcome of the 1967 Mother's Day card campaign featuring Primer, Barbara Avedon wrote in 1974: "We intended to be answered to by those men in Washington whom we paid with our tax dollars and whom we were convinced would respond the very moment they learned of our displeasure." (Avedon) The Vietnam war eventually ended in 1975. One can infer that Primer's role in the peace movement helped galvanize the political support that brought it to its end, especially among women. In 2003, at the onset of the US–Iraq war, Another Mother for Peace was revived and once again Primer is its emblem. (BullNBear52 2007)

The outcome of the 2008 American election is known: Barack Obama was elected president. Referring to the impact of Fairey's poster, one observer wrote: "Once representations of the candidate were no longer left exclusively to the corporate media, the Obama brand took on its own momentum. It was a self-reinforcing dynamic of cool: no one made a pop-art poster for Clinton or McCain." (Friedman 2009: 346)

The Primer and Hope posters demonstrate, convincingly and over separate eras, that designers as authors have brought about change through "a personal concern for world problems, and an active interest in issues that have an impact on the individual, society

and the planet as a whole. Protest and personal expression, particularly in graphic or visual form, ...[continue] to be a vibrant aspect of the new personal politics and its global prespective." (McQuiston 2004: 6)

Activist design authorship is greater than the sum of its parts – graphic design, writing, image-making and self-publishing – when it is engaged in social and political change.

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