

MILTON GLASER & MIRKO ILIĆ

THE



**DESIGN
OF**



DISSIDENT

FOREWORD BY TONY KUSHNER

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BY TONY KUSHNER

At the beginning of Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma*, the French army arrives in Milan, whose citizens, under the despotic rule of the Holy Roman Empire, "were still subject to certain minor monarchical restrictions that continued to vex them. For instance," Stendhal writes:

"the Archduke, who resided in Milan and governed in the name of his cousin the [Holy Roman] Emperor, had conceived the lucrative notion of speculating in wheat.

Consequently, no peasant could sell his crop until His Highness's granaries were full.

In May 1796, three days after the entry of the French, a young miniaturist named Gros, slightly mad and subsequently famous, arrived with the army and overheard talk in the great Caffè dei Servi (fashionable at the time) of the exploits of the Archduke, who happened to be extremely fat. Snatching up the list of ices stamped on a sheet of coarse yellow paper, he drew on the back a French

RESISTANCE

soldier thrusting his bayonet into the obese Archduke's belly: instead of blood out poured an incredible quantity of grain. The idea of caricature or cartoon was unknown in this nation of wary despotism. The sketch Gros had left on the table of the Caffè dei Servi seemed a miracle from Heaven; it was printed overnight, and twenty thousand copies were sold the next day.

This image shares with other successful instances of graphic dissent at least three characteristics: It is shocking, it is clever—even funny in a grim sort of way—and its meaning is instantly intelligible. And perhaps it shares one other character-

istic: It is, or at least it seems to be, samizdat, dangerous, forbidden. Resistance is sending up a signal flare in the darkness. A scrap of torn menu has been left on a café table, left behind for others to find, others who know what the artist knows—that a violent, unjust, criminal order is overdue for abolishment. Some galling truth that has yet to be organized, formulated, that can't yet be spoken out loud, that can be only grumbled and whispered, some truth that lies imprisoned beneath the surface of public discourse is suddenly, finally liberated, shouted at great volume, a cry of rebellion carrying everywhere at once, a cry all the more powerful for being entirely silent, expressed by a cartoon, entirely visual, needing no words, as if to say, by



saying nothing at all: “We all know this truth, all of us have always known what’s represented here, that’s why it’s so recognizable. And it’s time to declare the secret openly in public places; it’s time to act.” As Freud warns us, when the repressed returns, it does so with immense force.

Stendhal chooses Antoine-Jean Gros’s little act of graphic design/terrorism to emblemize a turning point of political consciousness, the awakening of an oppressed people to an awareness that “whatever it had hitherto respected was sovereignly absurd and on occasion odious.” It had waited in everyone’s mind, this public execution of the tyrant, this goring of a greedy aristocrat; it needed only Gros’s impulsive, casual, almost-accidental gesture of public articulation, and the collective mind and spirit of the people leapt forward in a lightning rush to greet it, to embrace it, and to act on the Promethean freedom fire it delivered to them. Stendhal is describing one of those images everyone has encountered at least once in his or her life—an image on a poster, brand-new yet long-expected, possessing the power of the Uncanny, as if a complete stranger on the street had stepped up to you and spoken clearly something deeply familiar but also deeply private, something you believed only you or very few others like you believed. Miraculous indeed. The political is the arena of the miraculous, where the collective and the communal, so routinely repressed, so viciously suppressed, stages its returns, where eternal truths and immortal edifices can dissolve in an eye blink, in historical time, where change rather than stasis is the only constant. Marianne Moore describes the miracle of the political perfectly: “That which it is impossible to force, it is impossible to hinder.”

It is even more of a miracle that the act of forcing the impossible is, in the history of political revolution, often catalyzed by something as flimsy as a poster plastered on a wall—the perfect poster on the perfect wall at the perfect moment. What’s miraculous is not that great graphic design, employing shock, wit, and clarity borne of urgency, can move people to action, to acts of courage and sacrifice, overcoming habit and fear. Art can do that; art is always having those sorts of effects. Art can’t change anything except people—but art changes people, and people can make everything change.

What’s truly miraculous is that, as hard as it is to make the perfect poster—and it must be

immensely hard—someone nearly always seems to be on hand to do the job when the time demands it. Consider the miracle of John Heartfield, Käthe Kollwitz, Aleksander Rodchenko, Casimir Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin, the designers of ACT UP’s SILENCE=DEATH, and the artists who edited and are represented in this volume. The time arrives for a silent truth to become a public truth, a collective truth; the pressure of great human need bids the time arrive. Human need conjures up the messianic moment—at least some of the time it does.

Is there a dismal history to be written of embryonic political movements aborted for want of a great graphic designer? One ought to be careful about claiming too much for art, but fires die for lack of kindling. So I suspect that there may be such a history, though I’m not sure I want anyone to bother unearthing it.

Returning to the passage from *Charterhouse*, it should be pointed out that Gros sketches his caricature three days after the French have taken Milan, and the Archduke’s reign is already over; rather than simply helping overturn a greedy tyrant, Gros is also doing his part in cementing French domination of the Milanese, replacing Austro-Hungarian/Spanish domination. Stendhal’s infallible irony drew him to this, a fat pig of an archduke being skewered graphically by a caricaturist whose name means “big”—and who did, in fact, become “famous” as an anti-Romanticist conservative painter whose epic canvasses flattered newly minted emperors and kings (and who finally committed suicide).

It’s hardly news: Politics is impure, political actors human and fallible, and the battles of opposites are never sharp edged. Twenty-first-century admirers of great political graphic design can’t banish an uneasiness in appreciating design’s power to catalyze change. We’ve seen too often how great design successfully sells monstrous lies, and we know how closely related to the whole process of selling and branding, of merchandising and commodifying, how intimately related to business, to commerce, all graphic art is. The marketplace created graphic design, its vocabulary, its ether. This is to say nothing more than that an appreciation of the progressive power of great political graphic design leads us to an appreciation of how inescapable the language of oppression and exploitation is, even in the struggle against oppres-



“No More War” (Poster)
Käthe Kollwitz, 1924



The Bug As Vermin
Exterminator (Magazine)
John Heartfield, 1933

sion—an appreciation shaped more elegantly by the French than by any other culture, from Stendhal through Proust through Althusser. This awareness can lead to despair, if one concludes that change is impossible, or to hope, if one concludes that every phenomenon, including language, including the language of oppression, carries within itself the seeds of its own unraveling.

So great is our knowledge, in the early years of the twenty-first century, of all that has come before us, so vast is our experience of both human success and also staggering, holocaustic failure, and so sophisticated is our understanding of how little we understand, how vaguely we understand, that a toxic cynicism pervades our spirit, shutting down our capacity for faith, for hope, for imagining change—and consequently shutting down our passion, our imagination. These posters, these works of art, have a restorative power. Each is an argument that stamps itself indelibly in on the soul of the passer-by; accepted or rejected, the argument, the claim, or demand each makes becomes a spark in the dialectical engine of consciousness, of human life. The best of these posters speak with a direct force, past all our qualifying, temporizing, even our scrupling and wisdom, to our passion, our appetite, our starved hunger for communal understanding, for collective agency, for belonging, for justice, and for change.

—Tony Kushner © 2005



Silence=Death (Poster)
Act Up, New York, 1986

Tony Kushner, born in Manhattan in July of 1956, grew up in Lake Charles, Louisiana, where his family moved after inheriting a lumber business. He earned a bachelor's degree from Columbia University and later did postgraduate work at New York University. In the early 1980s, he founded a theater group and began writing and producing plays. In the early 1990s, he scored a monster hit with the epic, seven-hour, two-part, Broadway blockbuster *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, which earned a Pulitzer Prize, two Tony Awards, two Drama Desk Awards, the Evening Standard Award, two Olivier Award Nominations, the New York Critics Circle Award, the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award, and the LAMBDA Liberty Award for Drama. This groundbreaking play focuses on three households in turmoil: a gay couple, one of whom has AIDS; a Mormon man coming to terms with his sexuality; and the infamous lawyer Roy Cohn, a historical figure who died of AIDS in 1986, denying his homosexuality all the way to his deathbed. *Newsweek* wrote of *Angels in America*:

"Daring and Dazzling! The most ambitious American play of our time: an epic that ranges from earth to heaven; focuses on politics, sex and religion; transports us to Washington, the Kremlin, the South Bronx, Salt Lake City and Antarctica; deals with Jews, Mormons, WASPs, blacks; switches between realism and fantasy, from the tragedy of AIDS to the camp comedy of drag queens to the death or at least the absconding of God."



DISSSENT CONDI

MILTON GLASER INTERVIEWED BY STEVEN HELLER

Heller: In oppressive societies, dissent is alternately called subversion, reaction, blasphemy, and is usually viewed as a criminal act. In the United States, dissent is a positive thing. Would you agree?

Glaser: It depends what the meaning of “positive” is, to paraphrase our former president. Dissent seems to have a liturgical quality, or, at least, a reference to the dogma of the church, and I think the word was used more frequently in that sense than almost any other, where there was a dissent from the agreed-upon conventions of the church by people who wanted to modify or change those conventions.

Heller: You mean the way that Martin Luther launched the Reformation when he nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Wittenberg Church?

Glaser: Yes, among others. It seems to me that dissent disagrees with religious dogma as often as it does about political dogma. Although in both cases, they are attempts to deal with existing power.

Heller: Changing an established order is the goal of dissent. But is it done in a constructive or destructive way?

Glaser: It can be either. Dissenters usually have the idea that their dissent is an attempt to improve an existing condition. Although I suppose in the American South, when racist Southerners were demonstrating against the Civil Rights movement, from our point of view, we might say that the reaction was motivated by self-interest rather than a sense of fairness.

Heller: Were they using “dissent” as their operative term, or was it a blatant rejection of the federal government’s imposition of equal rights?

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Glaser: I'm not sure it's relevant whether people use the word "dissent" or not. They certainly disagreed with the government and an aspect of dissent is disagreement. We like to feel dissent is about a notion of fairness that is being violated by the existing power structure.

Heller: Is fairness the key issue?

Glaser: This notion of fairness may be intrinsic to our species. Adam Cohen in the *New York Times* ["Editorial Observer; What the Monkeys Can Teach Humans About Making America Fairer" – September 21, 2003] wrote about experiments conducted by scientists in Scandinavia with Capuchin monkeys proving that when they were all fed the same kind of food they were very cooperative and would exchange things for the food that they were given. But as soon as one member of the group was given a delicacy that was considered to be superior to what the rest were

all receiving, the monkeys went crazy. They could not stand the idea that they were not treated equally or fairly. From this, the observation was made, and apparently for the first time, that a sense of fairness is intrinsic to primates, an idea that goes beyond our individual cultures, where it sometimes exists as a precept, but actually is in the racial memory of the species. One can only assume that this structure is a way to promote the survival of the species. So fairness itself may have represented a biological device to protect the species by developing a sense of community.

Heller: But how does this unfold in the face of world behavior where we see various groups subjugate others and, thus, impose unfair conditions on the vanquished? This happens every day. Obviously, unfairness provokes dissent.

Glaser: You wouldn't need a sense of fairness if the desire for power and the instinct to kill one's enemy



were not another very fundamental characteristic of primates. Those perceived as not being of the same species, or even the same class, are held in contempt.

Heller: Dissent has long been manifest in a human desire for equality, but it has always been a fight against an overwhelming power that imposes harm on others.

Glaser: Exactly. And of course, when you think of dissenting conditions, there is always a source of power that is instrumental in producing dissent. The reaction of dissent is always in response to a sense of oppression that is experienced by those who dissent.

Heller: Dissent *does* have this positive implication as protest against injustice. But what is good dissent and what is bad dissent?

Glaser: If we characterize dissent as being mere disagreement we easily lapse into the eye-of-the-beholder argument: Is my view equal to your view? What is a good act as opposed to an evil act? You can get very Talmudic and convoluted in this ancient philosophical argument.

But I think that there is some sense of righteousness in dissenting opinion, and that is generally the reason that it comes into being. We do know that, inevitably, powerful institutions begin to oppress those who have less power. This seems to be as fundamental a characteristic of the species as fairness. So in response to the whole notion of unassailable power, dissent is a positive response and, as the button I designed says, “dissent protects democracy.”

Heller: But as you have noted, dissent also protects undemocratic ideas. We are in political milieu today where fundamentalists have transformed their dissent into power to overturn laws and social contracts that we’ve accepted as part of a liberal agenda for much of the mid- to late twentieth century.

Glaser: Again, it all comes down to the difficulty of deciding what is true, what is false, what is right, what is wrong, which is never an easy question. But we do know that there is, at least, an ethical core to the idea of dissent, and that dissent is very necessary because of the institutional instinct to move toward a totalitarian position—that authority, whatever its source, religious, political or academic, always attempts to marginalize people and movements considered to be deviant or not congruent with their objectives.

Heller: Isn’t it interesting that the word “propaganda,” which is a tool of both power and dissent, also stems from a religious root—the propagation of the faith, the Jesuits whose mission it was to make sure that people who questioned the faith were brought back into line?

Glaser: Well, it continues to be one of the problems of power. Because even though religion is theoretically an attempt to improve the condition of mankind, to make things better—to diminish unfairness—what we discover that, like politics, religion is susceptible to the same manifestations. Because of that, the history of religion is frequently bloody, unfair, and conspiratorial. So, at a certain point in your life you just begin to question this idea of absolute belief when it stems from any single source, and you become, inevitably, more skeptical and perhaps more open-minded about the characteristics of belief, and you recognize that all belief finally represents a limitation in thinking. Because when you believe something, your mind is no longer open to alternatives, and once that happens, the mind stops operating and goes on autopilot.

Heller: So does this mean that dissent should be a perpetual condition whereby you’re always questioning authority or dogma?

Glaser: If you’re in a constant state of dissent, you’re in trouble because you believe that dissent is the only position to take. In that belief, you have become encapsulated in your own convictions. So the dissenting personality, which we may be critical of to some degree, is one that always, in a kind of knee-jerk way, says “no” to any expression of belief that is alternative to their own. That’s not, to me, the great expression of dissent. I think dissent has a more positive side.

Heller: Is dissent sometimes a lofty word for complaint?

Glaser: In part, and of course we all know people who believe nothing is ever right; it doesn’t matter what the subject matter is. The meal they had, the movie they saw, the political system they’re living in—nothing is acceptable. The sadness about that, of course, is that these people are not choosing their responses (although I don’t know to what degree any of us choose anything freely), but are victims of a personality that simply says no to everything.

Heller: Dissent can be curtailed by official decrees and regulations. If dissent offers positive alternatives, why is it so terrifying?

Glaser: The loss of power is terrifying to all of us. If you’re the king, and you have a life for yourself and your cronies that is very happy and satisfying, and all of a sudden people are turning out by thousands in the street and you realize you could lose everything, well, you’re not going to leave quietly. So, in the case of institutions like the church or political systems, those in power spend their life holding on to it, and those who threaten that power are in for a very hard time, depending on just how much pressure the power can wield.



Early Christian Symbol from Roman Catacombs, at the time Christians were persecuted.



“Unite or Die!” Benjamin Franklin, 1776



Citizens of Boston, disguised as Native Americans, boarding ships in Boston Harbor and throwing chests of tea overboard. Engraver Daniel Berger, 1784



From *Los Desastres De La Guerra* Goya, 1810

Heller: Under the umbrella of dissent, there is peaceful and violent dissent. Which is the most effective?

Glaser: These choices are essentially situational. Sometimes quiet dissent, or non-violence, is very powerful and works very well. One of the reasons it works is because the dissenters cannot be stigmatized so easily by the official power. When the dissent is peaceful, it is more difficult to call demonstrators hoodlums, or communists, or even left-wingers. Of course, Gandhi and Martin Luther King recognized that fact. Power stigmatizes those who dissent by calling them irresponsible and dangerous. Expressions of violence justify violent responses by the established power. It's one of the reasons why people who dissent have to be thoughtful about the mode of dissent in order to accomplish their goals.

Heller: Dissent tends to start small and build, whether it's at a grass-roots level or in an urban context. As you're describing it, peaceful dissent begets more peaceful dissent. But how does one induce others, through communications and design, to become part of a particular groundswell of dissent?

Glaser: Generally, people respond to powerful imagery and words that contain an appeal to justice.

Heller: Is dissent, however, sometimes about fashion?

Glaser: As you recall, we had an evening where we discussed dissent [AIGA/New York's "Hell No" – Spring 2003, and "Hell Yes" – Spring 2004], and one of the things I observed was how ineffective so much dissent is. It can be a way of positioning the self in some situations. Coolness is attached to being a dissenter; the idea of opposing the existing culture is attractive to a lot of young people who want to overthrow their parents or their history, or identify themselves as being autonomous, whatever. In those cases dissent can be both personally satisfying and fashionable. Sneaker manufacturers, among others, have taken great advantage of appearing to represent a counterculture. Can you imagine a sneaker being counterculture?

Heller: Ever since the 1950s when teenagers were targeted as a viable market, there have been attempts to persuade them through advertising (propaganda) to buy into and from the respective manufacturers who want their dollars, which includes giving the consumer distinguishing characteristics, like the illusion that they are rebels. But isn't it a fact that dissent usually emerges from the youthful generation?

Glaser: Of course, and certain products now use the idea of the revolution symbolically in urging kids

to define their character by buying a product. And that's one of the saddest expressions of dissent that one could imagine.

Heller: Throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, there have been corporations, and the individuals who run them, who have exhibited lofty social and political consciousnesses, and have contributed to various causes, and even supported dissent toward government policies. How do you feel about advertising that's created for a particular product, such as Benetton, Kenneth Cole, or Ben & Jerry's, that use their products as kind of soapboxes for dissent (and advocacy)? Do the waters get muddied there?

Glaser: I think they do get muddied. In a democracy, there must be options within the culture for this kind of expression. But the truth of the matter is that it is the system itself that establishes the values of any culture. Our system believes in materialism and affluence as the fundamental aspirations of society. It is also possible for a democracy to become totalitarian. Witness what's going on right now, where the American people have been victimized into thinking that the ruling class represents their interests. Both education and journalism have failed us in this regard. Belief systems are self-generating. In a democracy, the mythology of democracy must be maintained. We cannot afford to feel that we are warlike, unfair, racist, or so on. But whenever those manifestations occur we deflect them because we must believe our own historical mythology. When we see industrialists giving money to good causes, it confirms our sense of democracy.

Heller: But does it represent dissent, or does it represent something else?

Glaser: Very often, it represents an attempt to demonstrate a concern for "higher values." The oil and tobacco companies are constantly supporting artistic events. The Metropolitan Opera, the Whitney, the Metropolitan Museum of Art are supported by the most pernicious corporations. Do these powerful corporations really care about art?

Heller: I think they come to care deeply about it because of the investment potential. They also care about it because it gives them a pedigree and throws them into a cultural surround that is not simply dollars-and-cents and an exploitation of the working class. It gives them cultural credibility and cultural profit.

Glaser: Perhaps it's like those patrons during the Renaissance who appear at the bottom right and left of many religious paintings. Of course, the love of Jesus was, in fact, the defining characteristic of social life in



"King Louis Philippe"
(Caricature)
Honoré Daumier, 1832



"You've been mumbling
1812 under your breath
long enough..." (from *The
History of Holy Russia*)
Gustave Dore, 1854



The busts of policemen
are shown as part of an
image of the Haymarket
Massacre (May 4, 1886 in
Chicago) in which police
charged labor movement
rioters who were
demanding eight-hour
work days. The event
was memorialized by
May Day; the government
then enacted Labor Day,
which could only be
interpreted as an effort
to obscure the history of
what management did to
laborers.
Illustrator unknown,
1886



that society. The defining characteristic today is how much money you have. Instead of buying another Rolls Royce, you can buy a Matisse, and that immediately gives you some kind of status.

Heller: But in terms of dissent, have you ever been involved with individuals who seem kind of like they're going against their own self-interest by supporting the interest of righteous or controversial causes?

Glaser: Oh, I don't know. I've met a lot of nuts in dissenting conditions. I've met a lot of marvelous people. The mix is not necessarily uniform. There's a difference between righteousness and self-righteousness, but it's very difficult sometimes to see where one lapses into the other. I think fundamentally, the people whom I know who are dissenters have a sense of justice; they care about the nature of society. Part of the characteristic of dissent when it's at its best is fueled by empathy, and it's fueled by the idea that other people matter, and that if somebody is hurt or victimized, we are all hurt or victimized.

Heller: Since the '60s when the Situationalists in France began to critique commercial culture through art and design, dissenting groups have co-opted mainstream culture's commercial icons. *Adbusters* magazine is a good example of "culture jamming," or obstructing the free flow of commercial advertising by intercepting and altering their messages on billboards and other media. These are guerilla tactics designed to overtly and subliminally interfere with business as usual. But in recent years the advertising industry has adopted very similar guerilla methods (as though they stole a page from the *Adbusters* manual). How does this now fit into the strategy of dissent? Does it neutralize one of the tools in such a way as to make it more difficult to create effective propaganda for dissent?

Glaser: There are many brilliant people in the world of advertising who understand the power of co-optation. They have no sense of shame about these things. So any idea that succeeds will be promptly stolen and used against you.

Heller: Let's discuss the art of dissent—which is, of course, the topic of this book—and the role of the designer as a propagator of dissent. True dissenters are activists. Is creating a poster, button, or ad campaign real activism?

Glaser: It's certainly a form of activism. Should designers be more involved in this activism than others? For years, my response was that a designer's role is not any different from that of any good citizen. From my point of view, good citizens are those who participate in democracy and who express their point of view, and

who realize they have a role to play in the life of their time. Being a designer doesn't suggest that you have any *more* responsibility. We all have the responsibility to be good citizens. We can either embrace that responsibility or withdraw from it. The passivity of many Americans has endangered our democracy.

Heller: The role of a designer is clearly to be a good citizen, but how do you feel graphic design as a profession can influence or support dissent?

Glaser: Graphic designers know how to communicate. We've had experience that has trained us for a role in the culture.

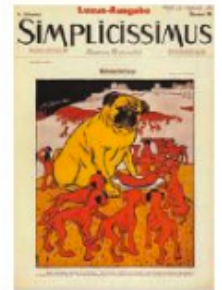
One of the things evident in this book is that the work of amateurs very often is as powerful as the work of professionals. Our times are characterized by the erosion, if not the disappearance, of professional practice in certain categories. Almost everyone is obsessed with the idea of design and being a designer.

Heller: So if an amateur can produce a visual message, such as a poster, brochure, or billboard, that will grab us by the lapels and make us think or act, then what does the professional designer bring to the party that the amateur cannot?

Glaser: We are in the midst of this revolutionary change, most profoundly expressed in the Internet, where the blogs now have become an expression of journalism, and where millions of people are now doing reporting, commentary, and editorials, and are beginning to have an effect that official journalism does not have.

In order to become a journalist, for instance, you have to pass a series of tests. After you graduate from journalism school, you become a cub reporter, then you are moved up the scale to reporter, perhaps a columnist or managing editor and, finally, the editor. All of this process imbued you with the history and mythology of journalism as you went along. The same thing happens in design. You go to art school, you learn about form, you study typography, and you learn about color. Then, you learn about the history and continuity of art. After school, you begin by working for somebody, doing low-level tasks, and finally ascending to where you're responsible for communicating something to others.

Heller: There's a man who quietly stands in front of my office one day a week, for the past five years or more holding a poster he's made with a large photograph of a fetus. He wears it as a sandwich board, and it is very hard to ignore that photograph with the headline "Save Life." It's not a particularly clever slogan, but it's a very potent anti-abortion message. He's grabbing some people by the lapels. What makes him less effective than the graphic designers who are in this book?



Simplicissimus
(Magazine)
Thomas Theodore
Heine, 1903



Nepszava
(Newspaper Cover)
Biro, 1913



Die Pleite
(Magazine Cover)
George Grosz, 1919

Glaser: Who says he is? The real question is: What does it mean when the idea of professional practice is being dramatically eroded by a class of amateurs who want to get into the game, and who, in many cases, are as convincing or as powerful as those who, theoretically, know what they're doing? It's really a question about the nature of professional education. What does it train you for? Of course, among other things, professional practice in the United States also trains you to be a conformist, to listen to the existing rules, to follow orders, and sell products. Education obviously reflects the existing societal values.

Heller: Well, the majority of design professionals do not create art of dissent. But what we're talking about here is a means of combining images and words together, that forces people to move, to act, to respond in some way. Are you saying we don't need all that formal training to successfully make graphic dissent?

Glaser: You have to be smart, and you have to know something about the nature of communication, either by instinct or by training. But of course, what you're suggesting has always been to me the reason for supporting the idea of an ethical practice: If the practice is, in fact, involved in communicating ideas, then you have to be responsible for what you're communicating. I can never separate the consequences of what we do from being in the world of communication. But it seems that, in some areas, people's instincts work without training. Everybody has a screenplay in them, and everybody can do a poster, and everybody can come up with a slogan. Some people are better at it than others. Sometimes, the people who are better at it are professionals. Other times, there are people who are totally untrained who seem to be gifted as observers and commentators.

Heller: Certain posters have iconic resonance that had to do with the context in which they were produced. One such, for example, which was definitely an amateurishly produced piece, is the photographic image of dead women and children murdered by American GIs in the hamlet of My Lai, Vietnam, with the typewritten headline, *Q: And Babies?... A: And Babies!* placed over the image in enlarged typewriter type. You could not wash that poster out of the consciousness. It spoke to a moment. It did so with real pictorial evidence (like Abu Ghraib three decades later), and it became an icon of anti-war resistance. In your experience, what were the one, two, or three most effective graphic campaigns that were either dissent or protest, underscoring a cause or an issue?

Glaser: So much of it is contextual: Where you were, or where the poster was, what was happening, who you were with. All of these experiences about

looking at things have so much to do with other things besides the object. I remember on the day before the [Ethel and Julius] Rosenbergs were executed [for espionage in 1953], I was living in Bologna, and all over the town were posters that were put up just with a mug shot of the pair with a protesting phrase: "Don't kill the Rosenbergs." Bologna was always a town with left-wing associations and sympathies. The entire town was plastered (it must have been done by the Communist Party in Bologna) with this picture of two forlorn-looking people who were looking as ordinary and as pathetic as one could imagine. I remember I was overwhelmed. Overwhelmed with the idea that these two inconsequential-looking people, for whatever reason, were being executed in our country. The fact that I was in Bologna, the banality of the picture itself, the fact that it appeared all over the town overnight, made it the single most profoundly dissenting statement I'd ever seen.

Nonetheless, the examples we each cited have very little to do with the design as the graphic object. In fact you could say that a designer could have screwed up those expressions by making them more self-consciously designed. What we were moved by was the poignancy of the event itself.

Heller: What is the purpose of printed dissent? Is the intention to appeal to people who already sympathize with you? Or must it convert those who do not? Whatever the goal, what are the best methods?

Glaser: One has to be very thoughtful about examining the effect of this imagery outside the fact that it's clever, well-done, powerful, and all the rest. Does it work? Is it effective? Are people transformed by it? Does it make them feel different about the subject after they experience it, or does it simply repel them and make them avoid dealing with the subject? Even when I'm moved by some of the most powerful images, I finally have to ask: Can it produce the results it intends?

Heller: I recall another "amateur" anti-Vietnam war poster "War Is Unhealthy for Children and Other Living Things" "designed" by Lorraine Schneider for the Mothers' Mobilization for Peace. It was very effective because the message was not violent and developed an empathetic response. Who couldn't see themselves holding, hanging, or walking with that poster and slogan (if you believed that the Vietnam War was indeed unhealthy)? But can a dissenter change popular opinion through the use of shocking words or images?

Glaser: Well, all of this comes under the general category of consciousness-raising. And sometimes horror works, and sometimes it doesn't. The characteristic of a shocking experience is often withdrawal. Very often, what is shocking is something you want never to



Woman suffrage headquarters in Upper Euclid Avenue, Cleveland, Ohio
Photographer unknown, 1912



Civil rights march on Washington, D.C.,
Photographer: Warren K. Leffler, 1963



see again or never to think about again. So, you have to be very careful about this kind of violence to the system. On the other hand, some images, even shocking ones, move you not through an empathetic response, but through a tribal one.

Heller: The most effective propagandists always understand that different “markets” require differing nuances. Is this true for the design of dissent?

Glaser: Karl Rove [President Bush’s political and public relations advisor] would say you do it one market at a time. Each market responds to something else. So, very often you can’t have something that is so generally attractive or compelling that everybody signs on, so you have to say, “Let’s look at the 16-to-21-year-olds and communicate there,” and then onto the middle-aged people who have something more to lose, and so on. That’s how you have to operate if you want to be in the marketing business.

Heller: From what you’ve seen of the material collected in this book, do you feel that graphic designers are sophisticated enough to know how to approach these markets, or are the designers dealing with their emotions first and the rest comes later?

Glaser: Both. You’ll find things in the book that represent both emotional and logical responses. I found the work from Eastern Europe and Bosnia thoughtful about the response they wanted to get. They were also identifying with a certain class of people they seem to know.

It’s easier to do that when you are part of the community you’re talking to as opposed to being at arms’ length of it. I suppose that the most compelling imagery comes out of people who are speaking to their own family—in effect, their brothers, their cousins, their aunts, their uncles—and have that sense that they are a participant in the situation.

Heller: Even in the best-edited collections of socially conscious designed artifacts I see many recurring clichés. The message may be heartfelt, but it comes off as banal because of all the clichés that are used.

Glaser: Stereotypes and clichés are the basic tool of communication, so you have to be careful about how you use them, but you frequently find that they are the most powerful instrument you have in reaching people. You have to re-imagine them. But they are, after all, things that are commonly known, and you are always dealing in the realm of what is already known. I guess what you really mean is that if something is so ordinary and unsurprising in its observation, people simply won’t pay any attention to it.

Heller: It becomes wallpaper.

Glaser: And that is the other question of provocation. How can you penetrate people’s immunity is always the fundamental question of a designer’s work.

Heller: How can a designer improve upon the photographs that leaked out of Abu Ghraib? The TV news and Internet sites showed these horrors minute by minute. In fact, I believe there are so many images on the airwaves that it’s hard to focus.

Glaser: Television is different from other things. Objects on television have no reality, regardless of what they are. Whether it’s a murder that’s being committed before your eyes or a concert from Carnegie Hall, they have equivalent meaning, to some degree. There’s something profoundly different about the experience of reading, where the mind is activated, or actually witnessing an event.

Heller: What about the objects of dissent that you manufacture? How do you decide what medium to use and what you feel will be the most effective for any particular message? I’m referring specifically to the war in Iraq, which you have protested through your *Nation* magazine button campaign?

Glaser: Campaign buttons are as primitive a form of communication as one can imagine. But if you respect the person wearing them, you tend to respect the message. The button intends to remind people of certain democratic ideals that are perhaps so self-evident that they become invisible. Sometimes, what is most obvious is very difficult to perceive.

Heller: How many ways can a message be presented? And how do you know you are making an impression?

Glaser: The principal problem is the entry point into the cultural bloodstream. When we created the campaign of *Light Up The Sky* during the 2004 presidential election, which occurred when the Republican National Convention was held in New York City, the basic idea was to urge people not to gather in groups, but to go out individually wearing or holding lights. I had originally wanted to post notices around the city, but there was no way I could do it without hiring an illegal sniper, who basically guarantees that he will keep your posters on view in any area of town you want and prevent other people from posting over them. It’s totally illegal and totally accepted. Unless you’re willing to spend the money that way, you can’t even post posters yourself because they will either be ripped down or posted over.

Heller: Or could you rent a billboard?



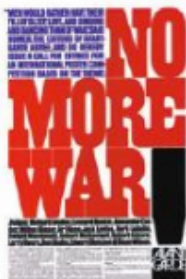
Black Panther Party Logo
Designer **unknown**, 1967



“Eat” (Poster)
Tomi Ungerer, 1967



Illustration for *Le Pave*
Ronald Topor, 1968



"No More War!" (Poster)
Herb Lubalin, 1968



"And babies?" (Poster)
Designer unknown,
Photographer R. L.
Haeberle, 1970



Solidarity - Poland '80
(Logo)
Jerzy Janiszewski, 1980

Glaser: We tried to buy a billboard during the campaign. It was \$100,000 for three weeks. So, you realize that frequently dissent is sort of nominal dissent because the ability to enter into the culture is very costly. Now of course, what you hope for is that these ideas will travel, as they say, virally. That people will catch on, and that the message will quickly circulate. The Internet provides this opportunity, and perhaps, the idea of posting printed objects has become less relevant.

Heller: There are so many of these protest and advocacy messages that arrive in your email inbox or can be accessed on various websites. There are so many different ways of doing it, too: Flash illustration and animation, JPEGs, and PDFs. Some are engaging because they are funny; others are poignant. Are these having any greater effect than the single button that you wear on your lapel or the poster that you do put up on the side of a building?

Glaser: It's very hard to tell what is effective and what isn't. Certainly, when the Swift Boat guys got on the Internet to attack Democratic candidate John Kerry, they were enormously effective in getting those lies circulated. Then, of course, they knew how to have the media pick up and amplify those ideas. It was a terrifically clever way of using both the Internet and conventional media to basically take a message out to an enormous public. Political activist of an opposing point of view would hope to be equally clever as well, using some combination of buttons and Internet and posters and images and words, to spread the message.

Heller: Another reason to go back to that question of who do we pay attention to?

Glaser: The problem of the Internet is tremendous information and no judgment. So what I suppose you look for is people or personalities or work that has risen above the noise, and has convinced people of its authenticity. In a democracy, you really need people who rise above the general din and stand for something.

Heller: Given the range of material in this book, do you feel that there are pieces that rise above the din? You can look at them individually and say they're striking, they're clever, or they're compassionate. But, are they all part of a big wave that washes over us? Or is there something there that gives us hope that this can actually work, that minds will be somehow altered by graphic dissent?

Glaser: I think it does happen. It may not happen the same way all the time. And it would be hard for me to select examples out of this group (I actually don't want to do it, because it would to some degree parochial-ize the others.) But my belief is that it does

work, that it has an effect, that the results cannot be easily traced, that the consequences of all this material, like everything else in life, is mostly invisible. Actually, I don't think it makes any difference whether you think it works or not. You *have* to do it. It's necessary for dissent to be expressed. It has to be expressed because to protect democracy, it's the only hope we have.

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Steven Heller, art director of the *New York Times Book Review* and co-chair of the School of Visual Arts MFA Design Program, is the author, co-author, or editor of more than ninety books on graphic design and popular art, including *Merz To Emigre and Beyond: Avant-Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *Paul Rand* (Phaidon Press), and *Design Literacy Second Edition* (Allworth Press). He is also the co-author of *Art Against War* (Abbeville Press) and *Angry Graphics* (Gibbs-Smith). He is the recipient of the 1999 AIGA Medal for Lifetime Achievement. He is currently co-writing *Anatomy of Design* with Mirko Ilić for Rockport Publishers, which diagrams the roots and routes of contemporary works of design and typography.

