

Graphic Art in the Summer of Discontent

The 2004 election has attracted artists in numbers not seen for a generation. Their designs give progressive politics a distinct visibility.

BY FAYE HIRSCH

New York, late June 2004: On a wall of feel-good iPod ads showing wired-up kids in silhouette dancing against electric-colored backgrounds, there appears, for a few hours, the now-iconic hooded prisoner who has become the emblem of the Abu Ghraib scandal. Like the ad kids, this figure, too, is rendered in black silhouette on Day-Glo; but the wiring connects to a far different tale. Were it not for the Internet, medium of choice for latter-day agitprop, this "iRaq" intervention might seem like urban legend: by the time one returns for a reality check, to Broome Street, to Bond and Lafayette, to last night's subway platform, the poster has vanished. Yet, on the Web, a record of the action is disseminated, a salvo in the multi-front war against political—and visual—complacency.

With the Republican National Convention slated to assemble in New York from Aug. 30 to Sept. 2, artistic activity in the city was multifarious throughout the summer. Not since the Vietnam War era had so many individuals and groups, scattered far and wide, devised so diverse an array of protest graphics. Already during the previous year, politically themed shows, mounted in response to the Iraq war, were on the increase; Paula Cooper inaugurated her new Chelsea bookstore, 192 Books, in May 2003, for example, with a show titled "Human Wrongs, Literature and the Art of Protest," with works by Zoe Leonard, Adrian Piper, Hans Haacke and others. For it, Haacke created a digital print, *Stuff Happens*, in which white stars tumble through a blue sky to a red-and-white striped ground: an American flag with its elements in disarray. Such terse visual commentary seemed to be the aim of many artists as the convention neared.

Numerous exhibitions were organized toward the end of August, sometimes last-minute, ranging from the Whitney Museum's historical survey of responses to Vietnam, "Memorials of War" [through Nov. 28], to "Power T's," a fund-raising show at Pierogi in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Here more than 75 artists generated designs that organizer and artist Mike Ballou printed out and tacked to the wall inside blue-

tape outlines shaped like shirts. In a celebratory atmosphere, visitors selected their favorites to be printed on the spot as T-shirts (the proceeds, at \$30 a pop, went to the Democratic National Committee). Like "Power T's," many exhibitions were up for just a week or two, coinciding with the convention.

Among veteran artists with new work was Sue Coe, showing drawings at Galerie St. Etienne for her book, just issued, *Bully: Master of the Global Merry-Go-Round*, which she co-authored with writer Judith Brody (*Four Walls Eight Windows*, \$18). Packed with dense texts combining facts about globalization and war with anagrams and doggerel, the book tours an allegorical carnival studed with nightmarish rides and sideshow freaks. These, of course, are none other than the authors' political targets, rendered in Coe's moody lighting and distorted contours. "Snake Show," reads a sign, and, below, Dick Cheney, as a boa constrictor with a monstrous second head (George W. Bush), strangles his female prey.

Graphic mobilization has taken many forms. A small group of anonymous artists and writers lofted a 15-foot banner sporting the words "NO BUSH LIES WARS," attached to large multicolored helium balloons, over the heads of an astonished (and cheering) rush-hour crowd in the main concourse of Grand Central Terminal on Aug. 16. (After several hours resting against the famous star-painted vault, the banner wafted slowly down, reportedly helped along by a rubber or cork bullet shot into one of the balloons by a soldier guarding the station.) Gigantic Arts Space (GAS), an alternative gallery in Tribeca, relinquished its digs to independent media from across the country and offered ephemera for sale (e.g., "Psychodelic Republicans," trading cards illustrated with parodic portraits: Bush as a neon Wolf-Man, Cheney as an orange-eyed beast enveloped in hallucinogenic mists, etc.). Directing protesters (and ostensibly Republicans) through the city was *The People's Guide to the Republican Convention*, a splendid two-sided map of events and sites devised by artists Paul Chan, Nadxi Mannello and Joshua Brietbart with a fleet of researchers and invited artists [see "Artworld," Sept., '04]. The colorful guide was being handed out for free at sites throughout town, including GAS.

Election-specific graphics downloadable from the Internet, and therefore adaptable to many uses (as posters, stickers, T-shirts, etc.), began proliferating just before the convention. The No RNC Poster Project, which bills itself on-line as "visual resistance to the



Banner released by anonymous artists in Grand Central Terminal, Aug. 16, 2004. Photo Liz Bieber.

Republican National Convention," had additionally published, by the time of the convention, two free newsprint booklets, each containing a dozen or so removable 11-by-17-inch wheat-paste-ready, black-and-white posters issued by a variety of activist groups.

Also downloadable was the black, white and red slogan "I'm Voting Bush Out" (devised by a group with the same name, with the Web address imvoting.com); the look, clean and concise, is redolent of late '80s-early '90s Barbara Kruger-esque graphics by AIDS activists Gran Fury and others. The design was painted on a truck that drove around town handing out the group's stickers and buttons. Of a similar directness was a "Not W" logo—an encircled W crossed out by a red diagonal—which a group called Window Treatment NYC encouraged people to download and place in their windows, whether or not they chose to remain in the city during the convention.

Artists Against the War (AAW), a collective formed just before the start of the Iraq war, coordinated its efforts with the umbrella organization United for Peace and Justice (UFPJ), which spent months unsuccessfully fighting the Bloomberg administration for the use of Central Park as a rally site on Aug. 29, after a march down Seventh Avenue past the convention site. (The march, variably estimated at 120,000 to half a million, was the largest protest gathering in the city since 1982.) The banner (and poster) devised by AAW, in which the legend "We the People Say No to the Bush Agenda" is printed against colored stripes, used the internationally recognizable rainbow flag design to carry its message. Its zing was in critical mass: 25,000 of the cloth banners were produced. As the project was underway, news came of artist-activist Leon Golub's death [see obit this issue]; in response, AAW printed a second banner with one of his "Mercenaries" images, which they paraded in his honor and afterward gave to his wife, the artist Nancy Spero.

The season's poster frenzy has engendered a wealth of visuals that bring together art, street culture and commercial design. The "iRaq" poster is an



Downtown for Democracy's "It's My Future" ad, 2004.



View of Marc Lepson's "End War" sign on a Brooklyn street, 2004.



Shepard Fairey: Hug Bombs, 2004, digital image.

example. It was an idea that arose independently on both coasts, with compositions identical but for variant texts. In L.A., an anonymous artist duo called Forkscrew designed three other silhouettes besides the hooded figure: that of a man carrying a shoulder-to-air missile, another with a whip and a third with a rifle. Carol Wells, director of the Center for the Study of Political Graphics in L.A., went on Air America Radio to discuss the Forkscrew posters. She soon received an e-mail from a New York-based artist using the pseudonym "Copper Greene," informing her that he/she, too, had come up with the image, and was busy wheat-pasting it in Manhattan.

"That hooded figure," says Wells, "is now as iconic as the woman holding her dead child in Picasso's *Guernica*, or the protester with her arms outstretched at Kent State." Sure enough, it is now being appropriated in many contexts. Richard Serra, for example, has used it in two lithographs printed at Gemini G.E.L. in L.A. to benefit the voter-outreach group America Coming Together (ACT). Both versions show the hooded figure as a frightening black specter in a gritty-looking ground, the smaller print (20 by 14½ inches) without text, and the larger (60 by 51 inches) with "STOP BS" scrawled around the figure's head in angry-looking script. (Serra's image was reproduced on placards carried in the Aug. 29 march.) The lithos are two in a series of 11 mostly less explicit prints by prominent artists (Susan Rothenberg, Jasper Johns, Cecily Brown, Ellsworth Kelly, Elizabeth Murray, Ed Ruscha and others)

produced at Gemini to benefit ACT at \$1,000 apiece. At Parlour Projects, a relatively new venue in Williamsburg staging an exhibition called "Republican Like Me" at its tiny gallery and at sites around the city, a diminutive sticker with the hooded figure and the legend "What would Jesus do? Don't vote Republican!" was anonymously adhered to an unrelated poster project by Viennese artist Ulrike Müller. It seemed the perfect complement to Müller's piece (conceived to be hung flexibly and graffitied by strangers), which reads, "The old woman said as she pissed into the sea / Every little bit helps."

Stay Gold Gallery in Williamsburg was host, from Aug. 6 to Sept. 5, to "Yo! What Happened to Peace?," one of several poster exhibitions, this one curated by L.A. graphic artist John Carr. It began at Tokyo's CWC Gallery in January with just 14 works; by the time it arrived in Brooklyn, after traveling to Los Angeles, San Francisco and Boston (during the Democratic National Convention), it had grown to 10 times that size (it moves to Washington, D.C., sometime this fall). The "Yo!" posters are by artists of diverse backgrounds, many L.A.-based. Veteran L.A. graffitist Robbie Conal contributed an image of Gandhi above the legend, "WATCHING." A number of posters came from the L.A.-based artist Shepard Fairey, who has his roots in street and skateboard culture; as "Obey," he creates more illustrational tableaux, combining political figures and biting texts, which were appearing in many other convention-timed exhibitions and on buildings around New York. There are newcomers, as well: Karen Fiorito, for example, created a multi-limbed, arms-bearing giant on the model of a Dancing Shiva that strides with its weaponry through an explosive desert landscape (*Shock and Awe*).

The posters in "Yo!" were printed in editions—many in high-quality screenprint—and some found their way to the streets. Brooklynite Marc Lepson's *End War*, for example, made to look like a one-way sign, was discovered in Brooklyn pasted over a real-life directional; *You Are the Source of Freedom*, Gustavo Alberto Garcia Vaca's hopeful black-on-neon-yellow letterpress poster, appeared on a chain-link fence surrounding a desolate lot in Inglewood, Calif., not far from LAX.

Among the best organized and most creative arts-related political action committees is Downtown For Democracy (D4D), formed in summer 2003 to fund-raise for progressive causes, organize voter registration drives in swing states and support candidates in tight races nationwide. A coalition of people involved in visual art (New York art dealer Bronwyn Keenan is one of the founders), music, fashion, film, advertising and publishing, D4D has staged events that have included auctions (for the May sale "Design4Democracy," interior designer Steven Sclaroff assembled an "Oval Office" with works by hot young designers that were sold to a fashionable crowd), readings (Jonathan Safran Foer, Susan Sontag, Dave Eggers, Paul Auster, Joyce Carol Oates, et al., participated in an extravaganza at Cooper Union), private dinners, concerts and exhibitions. D4D has glamour. Its June 29 auction, "Art Works for Hard Money," held at Gavin Brown's 15th-Street bar Passerby, raised \$80,000. It took place the same evening as a high-powered sale of blue-chip works by Chuck Close, Laura Owens, Elizabeth Peyton, Alexander Calder and many others, held nearby at Phillips, de Pury & Co., which garnered \$2.1 million for ARTS

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PAC and ACT. With lower-end works by younger artists, D4D's aims were more modest. By late August, however, the organization had raised more than \$400,000; it distributes funds with no bureaucracy and little overhead.

D4D has created its own graphics, of course, appearing on T-shirts with slogans like "United We Stand—A More Perfect Union," and it has published a series of four politically themed postcard booklets by a variety of artists (\$6 each, available at downtownfordemocracy.org). Each of the accordion-fold booklets, with detachable cards, was "curated" by a different group or individual; Book #1, for instance, was selected by Subliminal Projects—none other than Shepard Fairey and his partner Blaze Blouin, who founded Subliminal as a skateboard-design collective in 1995.

As we go to press, D4D was receiving entries for a massive poster show, "A More Perfect Union," which was to be mounted at the bar Max Fish on Ludlow Street on the Lower East Side (Aug. 29-Sept. 12), with smaller versions traveling to one-night events in Philadelphia and Columbus—cities in two swing states that D4D is targeting in voter registration drives. Organizers were expecting as many as 400 entries for the Max Fish installation—all on sale for \$200 or less—and they planned to choose several to issue as fundraising editions. To lure young voters, D4D has placed a series of "It's My Future" ads in trendy magazines and alternative weeklies (*Nylon* and *Me* magazine, for example). One of the ads, by Jason Nocito and Seth Hodes, shows a solemn (but hip) youth in a fast-food restaurant; beside him is a blurb text with some of his concerns ("I owe \$25,000 in student loans," etc.). "It's My Future. This Time I'm Voting," the ad reads, in big red letters. Exemplifying the confluence of art, design and commerce that has jolted the graphics of this most visual campaign season, the image speaks to a widespread social malaise that seems finally to have found an expressive outlet.

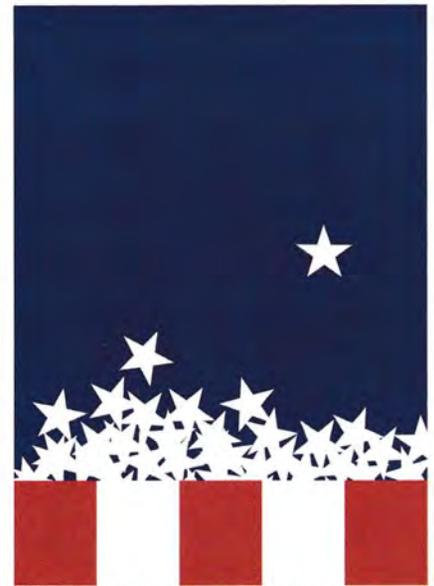
Special thanks to Cathy Lebowitz for her help in researching this article.

Banner printed by Artists Against the War in honor of Leon Golub, 2004.





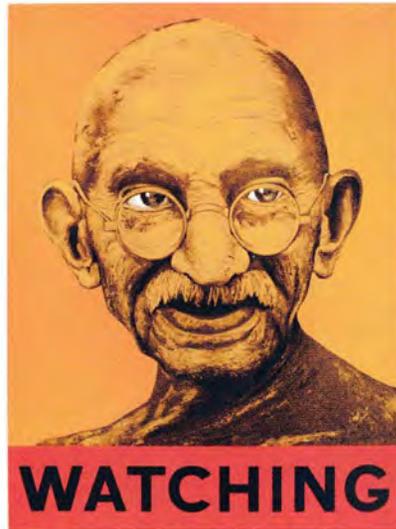
"iRaq" poster inserted among iPod ads at Bond and Lafayette Streets, New York, 2004. Digital images have variable dimensions and may appear in multiple forms, including postcards, posters and stickers.



Hans Haacke: Stuff Happens, 2003, digital print, 33 1/2 by 24 inches.



Peter Kuper: This Is Not a Poster, 2004, digital image.



Robbie Conal: Watching (Gandhi), 2002, digital image.



Sue Coe: Snake Oil, 2004, 11 1/2 by 8 1/2 inches. Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, New York.

Richard Serra: ACT benefit print, 2004, color lithograph, 60 by 51 inches. Courtesy Gemini G.E.L.



"I'm Voting Bush Out" truck being painted, 2004. Photo Andrea Geyer.

