Class Action provoked some unscheduled discussion at Aspen this year with their re-configurations of the Conference logo. J. Abbott Miller found out why

IA: How did you distribute this pamphlet at Aspen?
CA: The first day of the conference we went into the auditorium and put it on all the benches.
AI: What is the role of photography in Aspen? It seemed to be a minor issue.
CA: The conference organizers didn't know what we were doing. We made up the explanation that we were preparing a report on the conference and that we needed to gather information. We thought it wouldn't be appropriate to use the form of the pamphlet for a conference that we felt should be broad and open. We felt we needed to make a statement about that.
AI: So it evolved as a response to the pamphlet created by Ivan Chernyavsky for the conference?
CA: Right, but our response was not specifically directed at Ivan Chernyavsky, but was directed at all designers who were dealing with this issue. We wanted to question the conference, and ask how we deal with this issue as designers. We make these things, put them out there, they're very powerful and lots of people see them and they stand for something. That's something that we have to be responsible about, and sensitive to lots of communities.
AI: Your revision of the Ivan Chernyavsky graphic was an attempt to bring out what you felt was its latent content. What made it "inauthentic"? Is it an element of censorship in what you did? In some ways your project might be interpreted as an act of solidarity or representations of the female body in general?
CA: Yes—there were lots of things that concerned us in creating this. We wondered if we were not perpetuating the kind of imagery that we were critiquing by using it to announce or reveal the forms. We went through lots of deliberations about that as a group. Should we see the clutch? Should we see the vagina? Should it be covered? We hoped that the first panel of the pamphlet would have some humor, that second one would relate to it in an academic way, and then the third would point to where our interests lay. Put all the cards on the table?
AI: What do you mean?
CA: Right. And we hoped that humor would temper our statement, but we realized that we were not actually making a statement that was clear. We didn't show the shocking response that we had to that. We didn't see it as shocking. People seem to be more sensitive to it now.
AI: What shocked you about the logo? Ivan Chernyavsky declined to be interviewed, but I'm guessing that he might be surprised by the word "shocked."
CA: We felt that the form of the logo was not only provocative and provocative but also the position of it was lost, helpless, and passive. We thought that it suggested these images of women that are not in a dominating way.
AI: You see the drawing in a plan view? I always saw it in elevation.

It's the choice of using that particular image to represent all people that bothered us. That was only a woman, and that she was in an ambiguous position that could be violent, that the breasts were too large. On the tabloid-size pamphlet about the conference, the logo was on every page; the first one in the main image, and then down the page, the same figure is made in different ways. One is done in pencil, another is done with an IBM-like stripe, so each one is another symbolic abstraction.
AI: Several different takes on it?
CA: Exactly. That upset me a lot. That use of abstraction seemed to me and far from what I imagined the image really stood for. Those pages could have been a great opportunity to have the figure move, to have other figures come in, and give it some life. Instead the same image was repeated over and over again, almost as if it was stuck and incapable of movement.
CA: I think that's a point, and we experienced this in our conference. The first day of our workshop we wanted people to know that we did the pamphlet and that it was an example of the kind of experience that we wanted to have in this workshop. We wanted to work on having an opinion against being passive, thinking that something that actually communicates. After we said that something got up and left, and we thought that was great. A lot of the projects that were done in the workshop were about the logos. Some people felt like "oh yes, it felt that way too, but I don't agree with what you did," and then they chose their own direction.
AI: Do you think there is a danger of creating a climate in which people become afraid to represent what they think? Would this have been more palatable to you as a purely typographic treatment?
CA: As a group Class Action tends not to use images. We work with lots of type and use minimal means in the most pared-down form. With our "Raising Awareness" show about HIV+ women in New Haven we didn't feel that we should photograph these people. That would define them too much. Instead, we wanted to evoke their presence.
AI: Right.
Human Bodies

Human Bodies

Presentation of

We see this as a woman on her back. It made us think of the images in pornographic magazines, which are in the same position. To use just one of those images didn't convey any of the riffs or fragmentation of Chernayef's edges.

Right.

These marks of ripping and leaving pieces unconnected increased the logo's feeling of violence. Such poses are in pornographic magazines and it remained us that immediately.

Are there much disagreement between the female versus male membership of Class Action, or was it a unified response?

C: I think the women felt the violence in it more. Once it became a project then, of course, we all got behind it and tried to do the right thing. I think the women might have seen more of the violence than the men but not necessarily.
Do you think there's a danger of creating a climate in which people become afraid to represent at all?

I'm curious about the implication that there is a "correct" representation of the female form. It's a conventional, stereotypical notion. There's nothing wrong with that. It's a representation that can be brought into a discourse about human bodies. I think the reason is simply the fact that this was the form that was accepted. It wasn't in use. It's not a role model. It wasn't a part of the existing repertoire. The image could have been moving in different positions, or another figure could have come in. I think all of those things could have kept the sexuality of it.

Is sexuality something that can't be brought into a discourse about human bodies?

It seems that sexuality and eroticism of the female or male body are becoming less loaded in representation. It's because it was a male designer and a female subject, or it's because it's only female versus male and female.

AL: It's a combination.

AR: But this suggests a diminishing role of possibilities for designers to express themselves without fear of reprisal. We may be backing ourselves into a corner where we allow ourselves only expressions that are clear, clean, and sanitized. I imagine other designers in subcultural years who want to do something provocative, and suddenly the board, or whomever, says "Oh, no."