

Hope to Nope: the impact of Graphics in Politics.

- by Maïa Morgensztern

What do a knitted pink hat, a giant inflatable Duck, a mug tagged 'I'm IN' and a Donald Trump Misfortune Teller machine have in Common? They are all objects designed to disseminate a political message. For its latest exhibition, the Design Museum in London stages Hope to Nope: Graphics and Politics 2008-18 to reveal the power of graphic design in the social and political arenas. The institution looks at the last ten years of political shifts and instability around the world through various memorabilia and interactive displays. A sensitive topic that prompted the museum to issue a disclaimer to distance itself from the views expressed within its walls.

In an interesting turn of events, and as the exhibition draws to a close, a third of participating artists recently stormed the building to demand the removal of their works. The activists, whose creations are often infused with their sociopolitical ideologies, now refuse to associate with the museum after it held a private party for arms-trading company Leonard. An official statement from the Design museum claimed its curatorial team was fully independent, and could therefore not be blamed for issues that are outside of its remit. For co-curator David Shaw this is yet another proof of the pivotal role graphic design and technology can play in dictating and reacting to the major political moments of our times.

Maïa Morgensztern: David Shaw, you are the co-curator of Hope to Nope, Graphics and Politics, 2008-18 which is on view at the Design Museum until August 12, 2018. You currently work with GraphicDesign&, a publishing house which looks at the connection between graphic design and other areas, such as religion or social sciences. How did you collaborate with the museum on this exhibition?

David Shaw: GraphicDesign& was created by my colleague Lucienne Roberts as a wish to challenge perceptions about what and who graphic design is for. They partner with experts from other fields for each publication, to ensure all research is thoroughly conducted. I was thrilled to hear the Design Museum expressed their interest in working on the influence of graphic design and politics. This is a difficult subject, which we had already widely researched. We had a vast amount of artefacts to consider and wanted to represent many different events around the globe, but I really enjoyed collaborating with the Museum.

MM: Exhibitions can take month, often years to set up, while the political world evolves very quickly. How did you deal with this issue to curate this exhibition?

DS: When we started working on the project we were in the middle of elections in Egypt and Venezuela, and there were also issues with Donald Trump running for President. Brazil had recently gone through major Tax related protests... so this is where we started. But as you said, things are constantly changing so we worked on projects that could reflect the evolution of these political situations within the exhibition.

MM: The show opens with Hope, Shepard Fairey's poster which was used during Obama's run for presidency in 2008. How did an image made by a street artist helped shape the idea of what voting for Obama would embody?

DS: The poster was originally produced independently. Shepard Fairey was excited by Obama as a candidate and created the poster on his own. He wasn't told to carry that message. As the image became popular it organically became the identity of the campaign and was eventually officially appropriated as a symbol for change. The poster was seen all over the world and interestingly became a meme for very different kinds of messages, from the religious to the cynical, to the far right's extremists ideas. The image got a life well beyond its original design. In the exhibition we show a few of these examples, one of them bearing the face of Donald Trump with the word 'Nope', referring to protests which took place during his presidential campaign in 2016. That's where the title of the exhibition came from: Hope to Nope.

MM: The Nope poster was a spoof made by designers. During protests, professionals and amateurs alike come together to publicly express their discontent. The message has to be impactful, short and precise. How is design used to rally people?

DS: As a graphic designer you come from the point of view of taking somebody else's work and make it beautiful. During protests people take serious risks with their safety and even their lives to fight for things they believe in. They create placards by hand drawing or printing text on cardboard, making collages, painting on bed sheets...etc. Often, it's not particularly well designed. It's actually rather rare to see predesigned posters during dangerous protests. People need to feel it's their own creation and voice made visible. They also sometimes use the placard as a physical shield from bullets, Tear gas and other projectiles. As professionals we have to keep track of these objects made by untrained people who informally learned design for a particular purpose. This is how some iconic pieces like the Pussyhat were born during the Women's March.

MM: In Politics, there is often a tension between the message and who has the authority to deliver it. Where is the line between information and propaganda?

DS: That's a really good question. I think that increasingly in the West, there is a sense that all messaging is propaganda... that everything comes from a specific point of view and is therefore designed to represent it. In some political activism and communication groups there is a realisation that we need to deal with the idea that 'impartial' media is a bit of a fiction. This is very clear in magazines like Strike, which are very open about their political views. They openly use a beautiful layout to convey ideas they are passionate about. The point is not to be impartial but to get a message across and 'educate' their readers. The idea of information versus propaganda is an interesting question but I am not quite sure how to answer it in a fair way. Propaganda depends on your point of view I guess. If you don't agree with a statement, you'll probably think it is propaganda. If you do, then you'll most likely see it as information.

MM: That's the exact issue though, which technology and social media have dramatically intensified. Facebook has been the centre of worldwide controversies for creating fake accounts and pages, thus disseminating false information. Statements, sources and imagery are constantly being questioned. It is problematic to think it is just a point of view... So is graphic design really useful, or is it just Fake News?

DS: I think graphic design is a way of making things portable. While the view of the maker of the piece has to be acknowledged, I don't think it means it has no value. On the contrary: we now realise the power of graphic designers, and how, intentionally it or not, everything they do changes how we see the world. It doesn't mean it is 'Fake News'. The responsibility also lies with the Media, because they are responsible for checking these facts. At the moment, the proliferation of cynicism around the media is spreading the idea that the Press is no longer a reliable source of information. Graphic designers can have a look at how this can be addressed and get the conversation rolling.

MM: Going back to social media, how have graphic designers integrated the specificities of working online to spread this 'portable message'? Twitter has a limited number of characters for example... Is the outcome different because of technology and the various digital forms of communication?

DS: Interestingly, things produced today are often very similar to what was being produced 20, 30 or even 40 years ago. The meme culture of the American far right movement uses a visual language that is deliberately recognisable, drawing from propaganda images of the 1920s and 1930s. So it has more to do with how that information is spread and shared, and the way in which algorithms work to create hidden channels through the Internet. During the last UK election, journalists found out that their own children were more in tune with what was going on because they liked a certain type of content on FB, which sent them through channels they themselves had never accessed. Doing research for this exhibition, we stumbled upon many groups of memes which are not apparent if you are just searching online. You have to first like certain things to come across this sub-culture world. In some ways the Internet is becoming more atomised, partly because of the way these algorithms work. Looking forward, one of the questions for designers is: "how can we find a way of maintaining some form of unity?" There is a real risk of becoming a society made of a plethora of virtual groups, which will no longer interact with nor challenge each other. Is that what we really want?

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MM: The exhibition also features a work called "What is modernization? Let us tell you in a rap!" The video was produced by Chinese state broadcaster CCTV, and released to coincide with the ruling party's congress in 2017. This is quite unusual for an official statement...

DS: The video used Chinese president Xi Jinping's three-and-a-half-hour speech on "Thoughts on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a

New Era”, to turn it into a 3min or so rap-like animation. Cartoon-like videos and other motion graphics are used to appeal to those who would not normally listen to political speeches, usually the younger part of the demographic. The video was released with the hashtag ‘big 19’ - a reference to the 9th Party Congress. A few days only after its release, it had already been viewed over 3,6 billion times.

MM: What was the impact of the video in China?

DS: To be honest this has been quite hard to assess from Europe. Very little information is accessible in English and it was hard to track the video down in the first place. One of our assistants found it on Youtube, and it has since been removed. We tried to get help from the Chinese Embassy in London, but they politely declined. A lot of information transit through private channels and social media there, like Wechat. So unless you have someone on the ground, you can never really know how this sort of political gesture is truly received.

MM: Recently the Chinese government released Dangerous Love, a public comic strip warning female workers against dating western men as they could be spies. This was released on National Security Education Day. There is often a tension between the message and who has the authority to deliver it. Where is the line between information and propaganda?

DS: That’s a really good question. I think that increasingly in the West, there is a sense that all messaging is propaganda... that everything comes from a specific point of view and is therefore designed to represent it. In some political activism and communication groups there is a realisation that we need to deal with the idea that ‘impartial’ media is a bit of a fiction. This is very clear in magazines like Strike, which are very open about their political views. They openly use a beautiful layout to convey ideas they are passionate about. The point is not to be impartial but to get a message across and ‘educate’ their readers. The idea of information versus propaganda is an interesting question but I am not quite sure how to answer it in a fair way. Propaganda depends on your point of view I guess. If you don’t agree with a statement, you’ll probably think it is propaganda. If you do, then you’ll most likely see it as information.

MM: That’s the exact issue though, which technology and social media have dramatically intensified. Facebook has been the centre of worldwide controversies for creating fake accounts and pages, thus disseminating false information. Statements, sources and imagery are

constantly being questioned. It is problematic to think it is just a point of view... So is graphic design really useful, or is it just Fake News?

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MM: How is that different from what was being produced before... Are there any identifiable trends in the use of Graphic design in Politics?

DS: "Protest graphics" have been rather consistent historically. It is usually a slogan in big caps placed inside a rectangle. The layout comes from old printed pamphlets, which are now used online. Later on we have seen the rise of brandalism, which uses irony or parody. It is often a well-known ad everyone can recognize, which is then modified to get the message across. This has been the preferred method by many environmental activists, who choose it to attack car companies like BMW. Now people use the meme a lot, using a found image and font, and then twist it to get maximum visual impact in a very short time. That being said, in Venezuela protesters still use an old method called 'Hope'. They use images of imprisoned leaders and other figures in exile for people to identify with. This is usually very popular.

MM: Did graphic designers integrate the specificities of working online to spread this 'portable message'? Twitter has a limited number of characters for example... Is the outcome different because of technology and the various digital forms of communication?

DS: Interestingly, things produced today are often very similar to what was being produced 20, 30 or even 40 years ago. The meme culture of the American far right movement uses a visual language that is deliberately recognisable, drawing from propaganda images of the 1920s and 1930s. So it has more to do with how that information is spread and shared, and the way in which algorithms work to create hidden channels through the Internet. During the last UK election, journalists found out that their own children were more in tune with what was going on because they liked a certain type of content on FB,

which sent them through channels they themselves had never accessed. Doing research for this exhibition, we stumbled upon many groups of memes which are not apparent if you are just searching online. You have to first like certain things to come across this sub-culture world. In some ways the Internet is becoming more atomised, partly because of the way these algorithms work. Looking forward, one of the questions for designers is: “how can we find a way of maintaining some form of unity?” There is a real risk of becoming a society made of a plethora of virtual groups, which will no longer interact with nor challenge each other. Is that what we really want?

MM: In the last couple of days, 40 artists and activists wrote an open letter to the Design Museum to have their works removed from the exhibition, after they found out the institution hosted a private party for Leonardo, a global arms company. They called “deeply hypocritical for the museum to display and celebrate the work of radical, anti-corporate artists and activists, while quietly supporting and profiting from one of the most destructive and deadly industries in the world”. What was your reaction?

DS: My colleague Lucienne Roberts replied to Design Week in an official statement, saying “[The project] was born out of the relief that graphic design has a role in influencing opinion and action and that, with this, come responsibility.” We were hoping that an understanding could be reached so that the show remained intact until its planned date of closure. I prefer not to comment on this any further as I have not been involved since the show opened.

MM: Exhibitions can take month, often years to set up, while the political world evolves very quickly, as this protest against the museum has shown. How did you deal with the inherent speed of News to curate this exhibition?

DS: When we started working on the project we were in the middle of elections in Egypt and Venezuela, and there were also issues with Donald Trump running for President. Brazil had recently gone through major Tax related protests... so this is where we started. But as you said, things are constantly changing so we worked on projects that could reflect the evolution of these political situations within the exhibition. When the Grenfell Tower disaster happened in London and people were outraged at the political response, we got a team to update the exhibition displays to include the unfolding of the protests. Things are constantly evolving, and while it can be very hard to update a project

like an exhibition, we, as designers, need to constantly keep a finger on the pulse.