

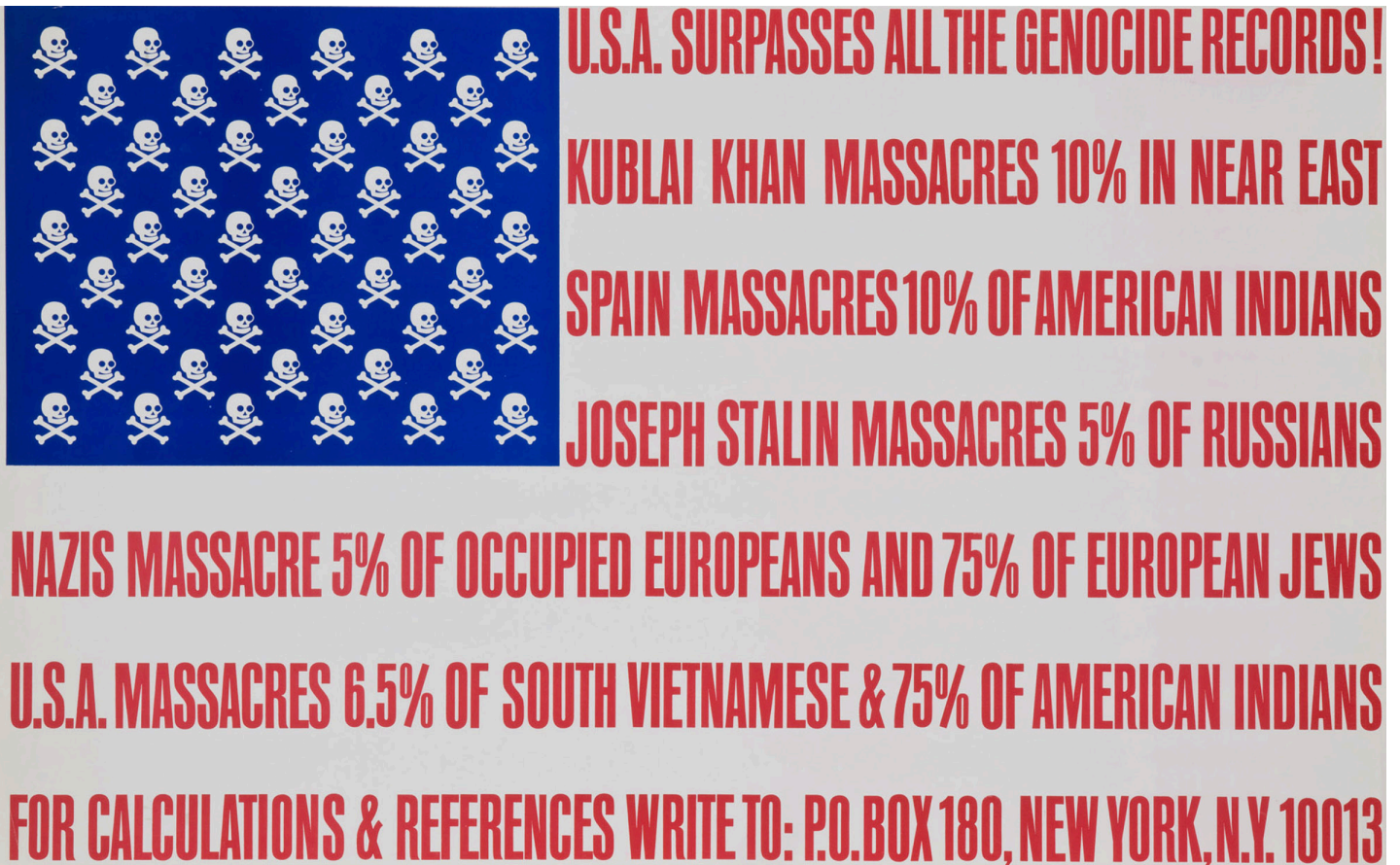
# The Radical Design Archive

## Preserving 100 Years of Political Graphics

Tucked away in a Culver City, CA office building, the Center for the Study of Political Graphics is working to document art's significance to protest movements throughout history.

Words by  
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01- "U.S.A. Surpasses All the Genocide Records!" George Maciunas. Offset, 1967  
New York, NY

On a recent visit to Culver City, California, art historian and activist Carol A. Wells takes me through the Center for the Study of Political Graphics, a 1,700-square-foot space packed to the gills with roughly 90,000 protest posters. The perimeter of the two-room office that makes up the center is lined with shipping tubes and flat files, the latter of which were donated by the RAND Corporation, a shadowy political think tank that’s been parodied in films like *Dr. Strangelove* for its involvement in U.S. public policy and “extraordinarily wide-ranging influence” on the world.

“I don’t think they knew who they were giving them to,” Wells laughs as she shows me the file drawers still affixed with labels like “CIA,” “World,” “Asia,” “Western,” and “Americas”—small signifiers of their former owners’ geopolitical dealings.



02- Flat files donated by the RAND Corporation. The Center for the Study of Political Graphics. Photo by Noelle Theoharis



03- Carol Wells at the Center for the Study of Political Graphics. Photo by Noelle Theoharis



04- Center for the Study of Political Graphics. Photo by Noelle Theoharis



04- Center for the Study of Political Graphics. Photo by Noelle Theoharis

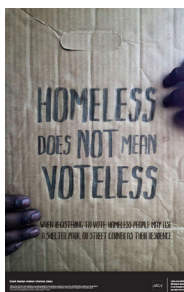
Whatever those file cabinets were holding before, their contents now are almost certainly the opposite. For the past three decades, Wells and a small team of colleagues at the CSPG have amassed protest art made over the course of 100 years and from around the world. With its growing collection, built largely through donation, the center strives to reveal “histories of struggles that are often hidden, and more often forgotten,” and it frequently curates exhibitions for museums and galleries that bring the archive out into the world. Each election cycle, for example, the CSPG holds an exhibit of political campaign posters, and its exhibition *Hollywood in Havana: Five Decades of Cuban Posters Promoting U.S. Films* is now up at the The Pasadena Museum of California Art.

Dating from the 19th century to the present, the social and political themes

of the CSPG's posters range broadly—anti-war, immigration, climate change, affordable housing, women's rights, LGBTQ rights—but Wells notes that they all adhere to two requirements. “Everything is political—advertisements are political, abstract expressionism is political—but not everything is overtly political” she tells me. “To be included in our archive, the poster must be intentionally, overtly political, and it must have been produced in a multiple.”



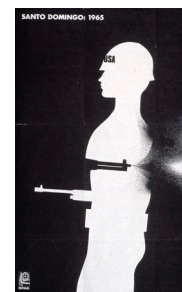
06- “He Kills Me. In Memory of Diego Lopez @ DM, 1987” Donald Moffett. Offset, 1987 United States



07- “Homeless Does Not Mean Voteless” Anthony Anaya, AIGA's Get Out The Vote. Digital Print, 2012 Miami, FL



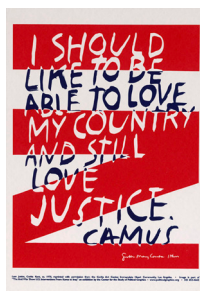
08- “War is Good Business” Lambert Studios, Inc. Offset, 1969 United States



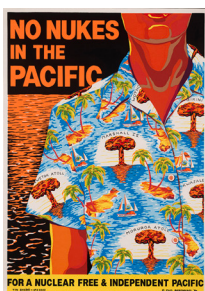
09- “Santo Domingo: 1965” Alfredo Rostgaard. Organización de Solidaridad de los Pueblos de África, Asia y América Latina

Wells founded the CSPG after spending a summer in Nicaragua during graduate school, where she was sent by a UCLA art history professor to collect posters produced after the 1979 Nicaraguan revolution. “I was always interested in activism, justice, and human rights,” she says, “but I didn’t see posters as central to that struggle until I saw how the Nicaraguans were using them following the overthrow of the brutal Somoza dictatorship.”

Wells remembers one incident as being particularly impactful to what would become her life’s work. While in Nicaragua, she saw a nine-year-old boy stopped in his tracks by a poster supporting the Sandinista National Liberation Front and the Luisa Amanda Espinoza Association of Nicaraguan Women. He stood in front of the poster and sounded out a slogan that roughly translated to, ‘In constructing a new country, we’re becoming a new woman.’ “I’m sure he didn’t fully understand the meaning of the message, but the fact was, he was trying to figure it out,” says Wells. “That was the moment of my epiphany because that was the moment I saw how posters work.”



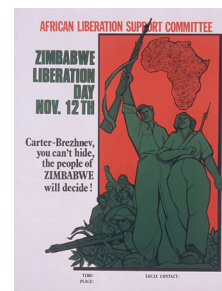
10- “Love Justice” Corita Kent. Center for the Study of Political Graphics. Silkscreen, 2003 reprint of 1970 original. Los Angeles, CA



11- “No Nukes in the Pacific” Pam Debenham. Tin Sheds, University of Sydney Art Workshop. Screenprint, 1984. Sydney, Australia



12- “Your Move!” S. Prikaschikov, Edited: I. Pillschenko, Y. Kurova Plakat, Socialist Harkevshiva. Offset, c. 1989 Moscow, Russia



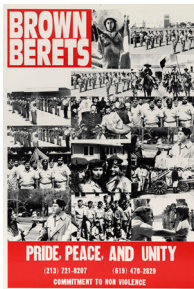
13- “Zimbabwe Liberation Day Nov. 12” Africa Liberation Support Committee. Offset, late 1970’s United States



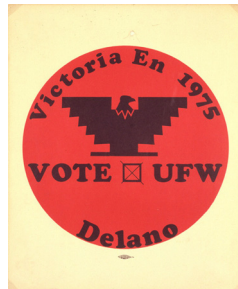
14- “Warning Against Warming” U.G. Sato, Pan-Pacific Committee for Environmental Poster Design Exhibition. Silkscreen, 1998 Tokyo, Japan

Despite being produced quickly, often cheaply, and typically en masse, posters have recently been enjoying a new appreciation as artwork as well as historical artifacts, displayed in museum environments alongside fine art. After the Women’s March in January, museums and institutions like the National Museum of American History, Temple University in Philadelphia, and Newberry Library in Chicago, among many more, collected the posters left behind by protesters for inclusion in their permanent collections. Still, Wells points out that the fact posters are created to be seen in the streets and public spaces—not to be hung on gallery walls—amplifies the impact of the messages they carry. And while technical skill and formal training lends itself to the poster making process, it doesn’t take a masterpiece to deliver a lasting message.

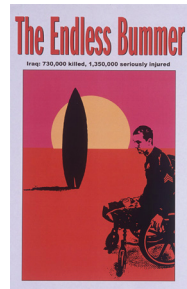
“You can look at something like Picasso’s *Guernica* and see how it’s become this iconic political statement against war and fascism,” says Wells. “Then I think back to the poster that started it all for me that summer in Nicaragua: It wasn’t necessarily the most visually interesting or well-crafted poster, but the context of watching that child interact with the words and image created a transformation within me that changed my life. It doesn’t have to be the *Guernica* of poster art to have an effect on people.”



15- “Brown Berets: Pride, Peace, and Unity” Unknown Artist. Offset, c. 1970 Los Angeles, CA



16- “Vote UFW” United Farm Workers of America. Offset, 1975 Los Angeles, CA

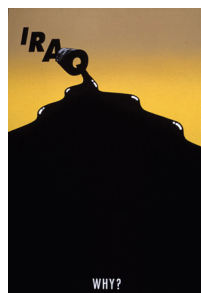


17- “Endless Summer” Nick Gerhard. Digital Print, c. 2008 CA

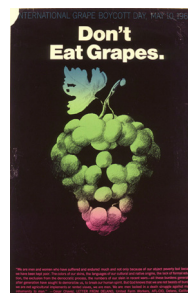


18- “Women of the World Unite!” Jurgens Grefe, Jane Carson. Offset, 1989 Bemidji, MN

The CSPG receives work from both professional graphic designers, as well as street activists often with a background in fine arts. Wells observes that “graphic designers will often focus on design over message, while street artists focus on message over design,” though the most successful and lasting posters, she says, strike a balance between the two. She points out as examples Cedomir Kostovic’s 1993 screenprint asking “Why?” of the U.S.’s decision to enter the first Gulf War, or Milton Glaser’s “Don’t Eat Grapes” boycott poster supporting the United Farm Worker’s Movement (both below).



19- “Iraq Why?” Cedomir Kostovic. Silkscreen, 1993 Springfield, MO



20- “Don’t Eat the Grapes” Milton Glaser. Lithograph, 1969

For its current exhibition at the the Pasadena Museum of California Art, CSPG partnered up with the Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (ICAIC) to bring together the posters made by Cuban graphic designers for American movies smuggled into Cuba after the 1959 revolution. Uninspired by Hollywood promotional posters, which tended to focus on the big stars and starlets that brought the studios big money, Cuban artists co-opted the silkscreen aesthetic of their country's revolutionary posters and adopted it to film posters. With a focus on the visual history and impact of social justice movements, CSPG exhibitions give its collection wider accessibility for serving students, researchers, and the general public.

As Wells explains, the center typically spends about two years conceptualizing their exhibitions, working with community advisor committees to ensure that curation is never a top-down process and never removed from the activists the shows highlight. "I'm not an expert on any of these issues. I learn something every time from the people that are actually doing the grassroots work," she says. If the learning goes both ways, the CSPG knows it's fulfilling its mission. "In turn, I think that many of [the activists] realize how central art is, and posters are, to their educational work in organizing."



21- "Stop" Lex Drewinski. Silkscreen, 1993 Berlin, Germany



22- "Fukushima Mon Amour" Yossi Lemel. Offset, c. 2012 Tel Aviv, Israel



23- "Hipsters Go Home" Ernesto Vazquez. Silkscreen, 2015 Los Angeles, CA



24- "Condozilla" Josh MacPhee. Stencil, 2000 Chicago, IL