

The Art of Dissent

When it comes to swaying public opinion, a provocative image can be a powerful tool

BY VERONICA MAJEROL

Whether you're selling a product or promoting an idea, a picture really can be worth a thousand words. The American colonists understood this well. To whip up revolutionary sentiment against the British in 1775, they emblazoned one of their early flags with a ready-to-strike coiled rattlesnake and the catchy "Don't tread on me" slogan.*

More recently, during the First and Second World Wars, the U.S. government used the now iconic image of Uncle Sam ("I Want You") to muster public support for the wars and recruit young Americans to enlist.

But just as art has often served to rally people around a cause, it's also been an effective tool for critiquing the people and institutions that wield power. Starting in the 1960s, with the Vietnam War raging abroad and the fight for civil rights gaining momentum at home, a vibrant movement in protest art began to take shape in the U.S.

That tradition is more alive today than ever, with the Web and Photoshop giving people everywhere the tools to create—and instantly share with millions of people—their works of protest and dissent.

The images on these pages comment on a range of topics, from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to the role advertising plays in American life; from Third World sweatshops to animal rights and the genetic modification of food. Some of the images were on display last month in a Los Angeles exhibit called "Subvertisements," presented by the Center for the Study of

Political Graphics (CSPG), which has an archive of 75,000 political posters from around the world.

Look closely and you'll see that the artists use a variety of techniques to convey their messages. Some try to grab your attention by playing on familiar ads and logos; others use provocative images to force you to confront an issue head on.

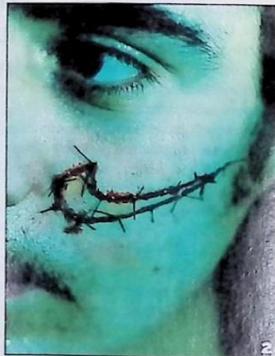
For example, the artist known as Emek created "R.I.b.P." (see No. 5) after last spring's oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. He describes his piece this way: "First you see the biggest image—a dead fish with a gas mask—then you see the symbol of BP, then you connect it with the wordplay." He says the dead fish is meant to symbolize the oil spill's disastrous effects on both the environment and on the livelihoods of Gulf fishermen.

Emek adds that he hopes people who see his poster will "remember that our world is fragile and connected."

Don't be surprised if many of the pieces here blatantly criticize big corporations or American policies or politicians; the people and institutions that hold the greatest power have traditionally been the prime targets of criticism. And while you may agree with some artists' views, others may upset or even offend you.

For Carol Wells, director of CSPG, the purpose of these images is to provoke a reaction.

"The point of the posters is to make you laugh, make you cry, or make you angry," she says. "But basically, it's to get you to start thinking about things more critically." •



1. Nuclear Emergency

An allusion to Norwegian painter Edvard Munch's famous "The Scream" series, this poster is particularly timely after Japan's nuclear accident in March.

MALGORZATA BEDOWSKA, POLAND, 2009

2. Nike Victim

The creator of this piece—part of a series called "Fashion Victims"—says it's a comment on both our obsession with designer labels and the horrible labor conditions in some Third World factories, where many of our clothes are made.

M. ZARGARINEJAD, GERMANY, 1999

3. UNable

The United Nations has been controversial since its founding in 1945. The artist uses a helpless turtle to symbolize what he sees as an often equally helpless U.N.

YOSSI LEMEL, ISRAEL, 1995

4. Crude Reality

A double-amputee soldier sits on a stool that looks like oil derricks. The artists say it's a statement about the wars the U.S. and Britain have been fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan.

RON DONOVAN, CHUCK SPERRY, AND SAM NEWBURY, U.K., 2008

5. R.I.b.P.

This poster was created after last spring's disastrous oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

EMEK, U.S., 2010

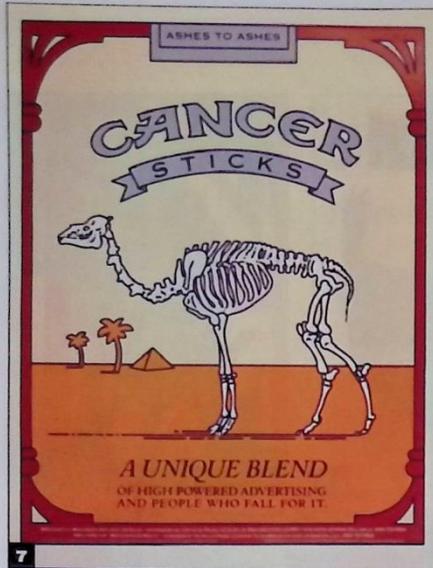
6. GMO Food

The lemon sprouting hair is a comment on the genetic modification of food. The artist used an unpleasant image to warn against the unknown consequences of messing with Mother Nature.

JAREK BUJNY, POLAND, 2004



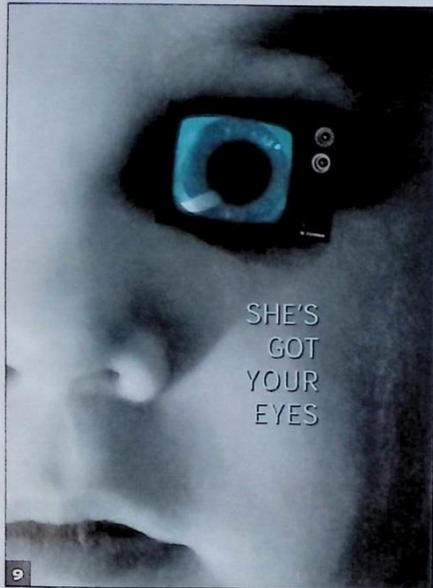
*THE TEA PARTY—A NATIONAL POLITICAL MOVEMENT THAT'S PUSHING FOR A SMALLER GOVERNMENT—HAS INFORMALLY ADOPTED BOTH THE SYMBOL AND THE SLOGAN.



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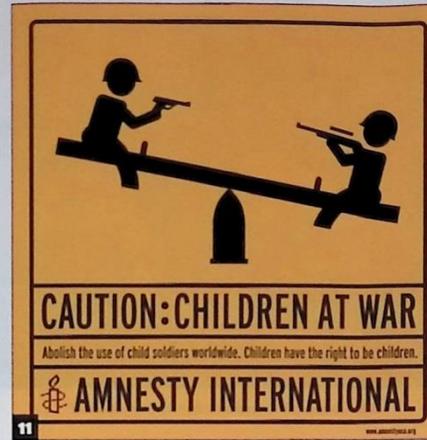
8 Spare an animal. Eat a vegetable. Friends of Animals



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7. Cancer Sticks

The makers of this parody of Camel cigarettes packaging were criticizing tobacco and advertising companies that collaborate to sell such lethal products. Strict restrictions on tobacco advertising have since been imposed by the federal government.

COMMUNITY PRINTERS, U.S., 1992

8. Dead Animal Combo Meal

This mock ad was created by Friends of Animals, a group that works to raise awareness of the inhumane treatment of animals.

FRIENDS OF ANIMALS, U.S., 2000

9. She's Got Your Eyes

The nonprofit magazine *Adbusters* ran this "non-ad" as part of its "Turn Off Your TV Week" campaign. It's a statement about how we're raised from infancy by television.

ADBUSTERS, CANADA, 2007

10. Uncle Bin Wants You

This parody of the Uncle Sam poster using the image of Osama bin Laden connects America's dependence on oil from the Middle East to the fact that some of the money we pay for that oil ends up funding terrorism.

DAVID FARNSWORTH, U.S., 2002

11. Children at War

Variations on road signs, like this one created for Amnesty International, are frequently used in protest images because they're universally understood.

WOODY PIRTLE AND CHRIS DUNN/
PENTAGRAM, U.S., 1999

12. Starbucks

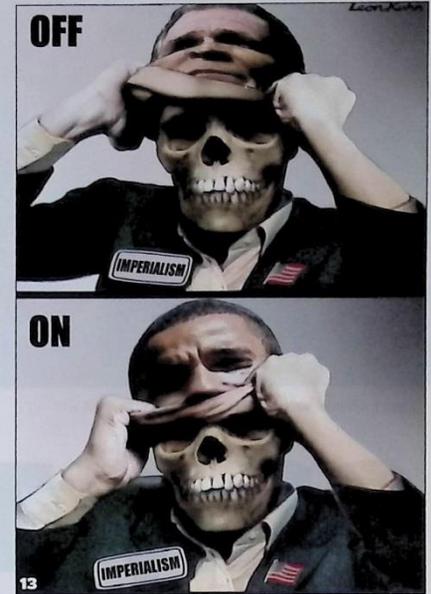
A high school art teacher in California created this piece. He thinks Starbucks underpays coffee farmers and can afford to pay more.

ERIC LINDROTH, U.S., 2006

13. Off/On Imperialism

The artist suggests that regardless of who's President, the U.S. still tries to impose its will overseas.

LEON KUHN, U.K., 2008



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14. Party Animals

A playful protest against what the artist sees as the limited choices offered by America's two-party system.

THOMAS POROSTOCKY, U.S., 2004