

(PR)OBAMA ART & PROPAGANDA: UN(PRECEDENT)ED VISUAL COLLECTIONS OF HOPE, PROGRESS AND CHANGE?

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...an onslaught of creative coercion to an unassuming American public... showing the world that the acts of a few can truly move and motivate millions

—Morgan Spurlock

Obama heybama bama bama O bama hey bama Obama... bam O bama hey Superstar!

—Appropriated by the author from the song Hosanna—Jesus Christ Superstar

Yet the art community has responded to the Obama administration's contradictions, hypocrisies, and distortions with near total silence

—Patrick Courrielche

Three of these books chronicle visual collections celebrating the nomination, candidacy, and election of Barack Obama. The fourth book explores one particular image from this Obama art movement. Together they document the recent outpouring of fine art, street art, graphic design and other visual work presented and distributed by artists, exhibitions, the Internet and other digital means, and establish a foundation for socially concerned inquiry, and for creating related art education opportunities.

Showcasing hundreds of artworks and several participant and observer narratives from arts, cultural, and marketing insiders, these four books catalog the Obama art phenomenon. Comprised mainly of portraits these artworks project qualities of sincerity, idealism, vision, accountability, progressivism, a contemplative nature, and an undying commitment to change. These images illustrate how artists, designers, and organizers resonated with the Obama identity, and serve in its continued construction.

In early 2008, the NAEA's Women's Caucus (Anonymous, 2008) discussed the importance of engaging with emerging political candidate imagery. "These pictorial statements are a hot source to motivate critique, to study the formative process of visual culture, and to apply critical investigations to create revisions" (p. 51). Noting the intent of presidential campaign images to

persuade, these suggested questions assist in decoding these images in the classroom.

Do the associations [you make with the images] match the candidates' plans for the United States? What values are conveyed? What is the intent of the presenter of the image? Was this image conveyed to the public by the entourage of the candidate, or was it intended as a rebuttal of claims or a suggestion of a darker side of the candidate by those who support an opponent? What are the historical and contemporary pictorial referents that subliminally supply additional content and metaphoric associations? How familiar does the viewer have to be with these pictorial devices to "upload" the intended meaning? (p. 52).

Following this initial framework from art education, an exploration of this self-professed and seemingly unprecedented (PR)Obama¹ art movement is relevant, and contemporary content for art classrooms. Just as investigating art as documents of social history (Zander, 2004), visual culture and social reform (Smith-Shank, 2003), visual literacy of graphics, logos and culture jamming (Chung & Kirby, 2009), exploring cultural propaganda (Yang & Suchan, 2009), and political art (Ulbricht, 2003) have come into focus in recent art education practice, so too may imagery of political candidates and figures.

While considering these four resources it is important to remain cognizant of the position of the mainstream art world, the socio-economic status, agenda, and relative privilege of each artist, author, and editor. It is also important to ponder stakeholder's opinions regarding this movement as being populist, as being an example of actuated democracy, the Obama art movement taking too much credit for election results, and finally, the art cognoscenti's labeling of this type of visual manipulation, and propagandizing as critical social critique.

Wert (2009) notes that, "Some art critics suggest this art movement marks the beginning of a new paradigm, that the Obama art phenomenon will lead to a rejuvenated American art movement" (p. 151). If indeed this new paradigm is to continue, society will be best served by artists taking their roles as public intellectuals (Becker, 2000) more seriously and ensuring that social and political art asks tough questions of the populace and its leaders. In this way, as Kushins (2006) states, "[artists] would be recognized for producing learning spaces where ideas are discussed, questions are raised, and possibilities are imagined" (np). As Said (1994) stated, a public intellectual is "someone whose place is to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma, to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations" (p.11, As quoted by Kushins, 2006). Conversely as Courrielche (2009) points out, many artists and arts organizations involved in creating art for Obama, are dangerously close to becoming tools of the state.

Added to these concerns, numerous questions guided my exploration of these resources for use by socially and culturally concerned art educators. In general, what were the artists' motivations for taking part in this action and movement? What ignited and then sustained art making about Obama? Who were the intended audiences for these works? Was this a grassroots, populist or artist

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coalition driven initiative or did the official Obama campaign have a hand in orchestrating these projects? Why is exploring the ‘unprecedented’ visual culture surrounding Obama important? Is it indeed unprecedented? What does this plethora of political art communicate to us about our society? Initial responses to these questions are integrated into the book descriptions, critical discussion, and inquiry suggestions that follow.

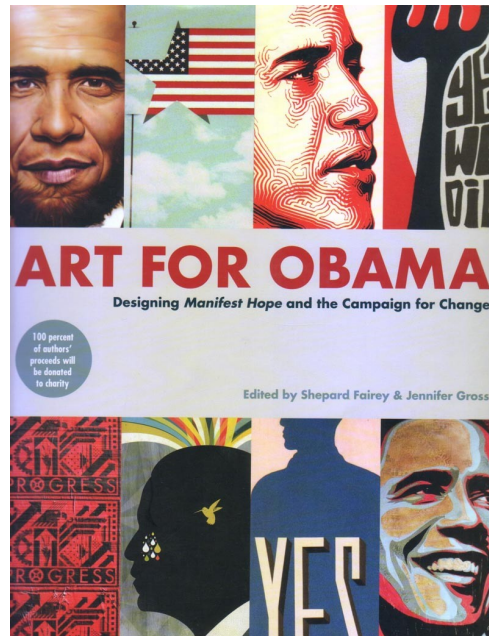


Figure 1. *Art for Obama: Designing “Manifest Hope” and the Campaign for Change*, book cover, courtesy of Abrams Image.

Art for Obama: Designing “Manifest Hope” and the Campaign for Change (Figure 1) documents the *Manifest Hope* inauguration exhibitions in Washington, D.C., and Denver, Colorado. Instigated by Shepard Fairey, produced by Evolutionary Media Group (EMG), organized by MoveOn.org in partnership with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and managed in D.C. by gallery owner, Martin Irvine, the exhibition was curated by invitation and from an open national call. The exhibition showcased work from approximately 150 artists, with only 5 open call entries included in the final selection. Many works related to three of Obama’s platforms: the Green Economy, Health Care Reform and Workers Rights. Honoring the ‘stay positive’ blessing from the Obama campaign, these preferred frameworks served as a vetting process undermining the exhibitions’ intended populist claims. This mainly invitational approach intermingling primarily two-dimensional works² from recognized artists, street artists, and designers holds great potential to incite lively classroom discussion. Additionally these works are contextualized by five brief, yet thought provoking essays providing insider perspectives from a variety of collaborators.

To begin, Fairey seemingly inflates his role in the start of the Obama art movement. The irony of this nemesis-of-law-and-order-renegade-street-artist leading an intense and coercive visual marketing campaign in support of the power structure is not lost on Fairey. He seems quite cognizant of his role and its impact stating, “...with the *Hope*³ portrait I was very sincerely making propaganda to support Obama” (Fairey in Fairey & Gross, 2009, p. 9).

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What separates his propaganda from the otherwise suspicious and/or dangerous visual manipulation of marketing campaigns, in his mind, is that Obama presents an authentic and meaningful product. Fairey notes the creative community's excitement about witnessing a "... genuine movement where artists felt like there was an opportunity to engage in democracy and use art as a tool of communication" (p. 9). He mentions also the power of portraiture. A portrait he says, "...conjures feelings about a person in a much more visceral way," and Obama portraits have the capacity to carry "...euphoric association with his charisma..." (p. 8). Thus, much that Obama claims to believe in, stand for, and promise was available to be captured and reflected in powerful portraits. Prolific examples include works juxtaposing Obama with historical transformational leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr, JFK, Fredrick Douglas, and Abraham Lincoln (Figure 2). In this way, portraits become loaded representations of Obama's constructed progressive identity as do other 'staying positive' works relating to his campaign. Fairey explains that portraits make "...the best tool for propagandist manipulation because they can project an essence onto someone that they might not really have..." (p. 9). Fairey of course, and other artists represented say they do believe, however, that Obama is the person they are portraying him to be.

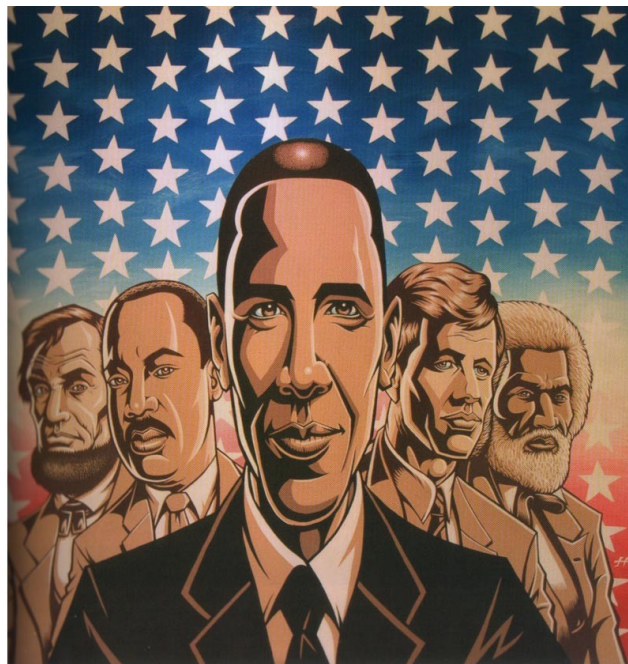


Figure 2: Justin Hampton, *The Great Communicator*⁴, 2008, archival print and mixed media on panel, 60 x 60 inches, courtesy of the artist and Abrams Image.

Staffers of EMG equate the mobilization into the *Manifest Hope* exhibition with the unprecedented "revolutionary inventiveness...prevalent throughout Obama's campaign" (Gross, Seargeant & Rollins in Fairey & Gross, 2009, p. 13). The authors comment on a perceived need for "...a new brand of creativity to be released" (p. 13) in the United States following the near disappearance of dissent during the Bush administration. Witnessing this revived interest by artists in democracy, they state:

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President Obama's election signifies a shift in the national perspective, as individuals take on the responsibility of being part of something bigger than themselves. Though the momentous historical significance of the campaign can never be relived, its revelations will linger forever: Hope is not audacious; youth can make a difference; and collective conscience isn't defined by party lines...our role as artists, citizens, and patriots is only just beginning (p. 14).

In Laura Dawn's essay, the unprecedented viral growth of MoveOn.org in 1998 is revisited. Credited with becoming "...the largest grassroots citizen's advocacy group in the history of the United States," (Dawn in Fairey & Gross, 2009, p. 18) and an inspiration for believing in possibility, and creating "...a way for like-minded people to reach each other, to band together to stop the insanity that was leading the country into war, corporate oligarchy, and both moral and literal bankruptcy" (p. 18). She synthesizes the participative Obama art movement stating "...through the emergence of the Internet, from the mixture of new ways to communicate and create, people banded together and put a stop to a way of government that was no longer for the people or reflective of the greatness of this country. And now we face, together, the biggest hope of all: the chance to rebuild" (p. 20).

While seemingly inspiring, this culminating resource is limited by its character and content of a mainstreamed exhibition catalog with commentary cleverly marketed to us as an underground, anti-establishment, populist endeavor that critiqued the prior administration, the status quo, and the societal ills of the United States. Laura Dawn overestimates its impact stating that "[f]inally the inequality of the power structure was turned on its head, and the people were back in the process" (Dawn in Fairey & Gross, 2009, p. 18). Rather, the vetting process for *Manifest Hope* constrained access, artistic freedom, and quashed any initial intention of creating a truly populist exhibition by clinging to Obama campaign platforms. Likewise, EMG's statement about discovering new roles for artists as 'patriots' (an extremely loaded word, post 9/11 and the passing of the Patriot Act) conjures up thoughts of artists and designers becoming active non-critical agents of the state in an assembly line of (PR)Obama art making.

What this resource does offer is nearly 200 high quality reproductions and several artist statements to use as art education source materials on which to develop and base lessons about the intersection of art and politics, art and propaganda, art as a historical document, and the power of portraiture. Useful as well for the socially concerned art educator are the narratives about community (albeit privileged and powered) organizing.

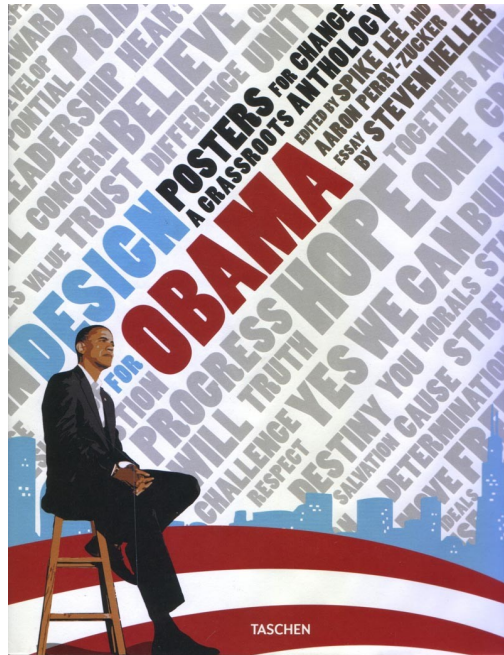


Figure 3: *Design for Obama*, book cover, courtesy of the artist, Taschen, and Aaron Perry Zucker. Cover art appropriated from *In Progress*, by Gordon Sang.

Design for Obama (Figure 3) serves as another “...historical document capturing the energy, excitement and hope...” (Perry-Zucker in Perry-Zucker, Lee & Heller, 2009, p. 9) experienced as people worked visually in support of Obama’s election. In the preface, Aaron Perry-Zucker, a recent RISD graduate, shares his desire to do something for the cause, decides to coalesce support from designers, and quickly implements the *Design for Obama* website with Adam Meyer. Within a week, this Internet “...venue for displaying posters and providing free and easy means for regular people to print out large-scale, tiled posters” (p. 9) for distribution and posting within their own communities was born. The webmasters feverishly sized and sorted dozens of daily uploads of (PR)Obama posters, graphics, artworks, etc., from diverse artists and designers from across the globe.

Editorial partner, Spike Lee first learned about the website when a staffer brought an appropriated version of the “*Do the Right Thing*” film poster by Art Sims to his attention. This new version, entitled, “*Did the Right Thing*”⁵ replaced movie characters with Obama and Biden and reworked the text into (PR)Obama language. Lee comments that this collection “...contributed to Barack Hussein Obama becoming the 44th President of the United States and the first African-American to hold the office, [and is] a collection that shows what artists everywhere have always done and will continue to do - change the way we see things” (Lee in Perry-Zucker, Lee & Heller, 2009, p. 15).

Contributing author, Steven Heller, says the works from *Design for Obama* resonate as examples which are “...as impassioned as any personal or muse-driven expression,” (Heller in Perry-Zucker, Lee & Heller, 2009, p. 21). He notes also that they are pure, “...given the designers’ honest and fervent response to this unprecedented national candidacy” (p. 21). Heller reminds us that although still possessing underground characteristics and the innovative viral approach Fairey took in

designing the social-realist inspired *Hope* poster, that it was indeed sanctioned by the Obama campaign. Conversely, he points out, the artists' and designers' works catalogued on the *Design for Obama* website, "did not go through the routine vetting process; the images were unfettered by a canon and command attention because of their freshness" (p. 21). While he does comment on possible needs for art direction and rejection of weaker images, Heller realizes a vetting approach was antithetical to the goals of the website—to gather a truly populist collection. Luckily, they received no negative, non-(PR)Obama, or anti-Obama imagery. He states the creation, upload and subsequent download of free images for potential clandestine posting "...enabled the artists and designers a chance to take part in the electoral process, to make their feelings known, and perhaps even impact others" (p. 21).

Design for Obama follows a more traditional graphic design orientation, portraying myriad posters and images using heavy text, iconography, and other rhetorical devices regularly associated with the Obama campaign. While substantial, this approach to the creation of (PR)Obama art is not as compelling as the works in *Manifest Hope*. The image index confirms the majority of the designers are established professionals from art and design fields and institutions—and thus problematizes the idea of this collection as populist. Although ardently professing its populism, it is rather a repository of works by members of a privileged and powerful design field. Additionally, the three short writings in *Design for Obama* appear in English, German and French, and while this tri-lingual approach is laudable, the omission of Spanish, given the languages' prominence in the United States and that "[f]or the first time Latino voters emerged as a mobilized Democratic voting block in states across the country...voting 67% for Obama" (Preston, 2008) is glaring. Certainly, however, there are still plenty of graphic and visual examples on which to build meaningful conversations in art classrooms. Four works⁶ in particular will be intriguing in art education inquiry situations.

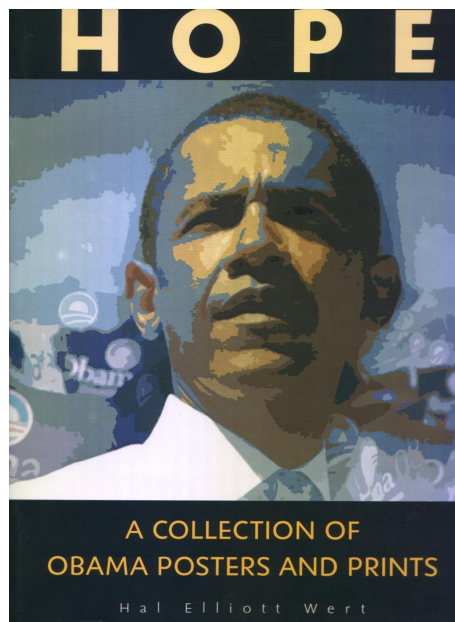


Figure 4: *Hope: A Collection of Obama Posters and Prints*, book cover, courtesy of the author. Cover art is a detail from the poster, *Grant Park*, by David Springmeyer.

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Hope: A Collection of Obama Posters and Prints (Figure 4) is visually and intellectually appealing as Hal Wert, an art and poster collector, and historian shares his aesthetic and intellectual understandings of the movement. Reproductions include his vast personal collection and attest to the eclectic range of content, media and approach among outsider and insider artists contributing work to the (PR)Obama art movement.

Wert chronicles the beginnings of the Obama art movement and the intersecting timelines of other related major projects and exhibitions. He credits the stealth and non-sanctioned poster actions of Chicago-based street artist, CRO (Creative Rescue Organization) a.k.a. Ray Noland as the “...pebble that presaged the avalanche of Obama campaign posters that would flood America ” (p. 11). Thus, Wert names Ray Noland, rather than Fairey as birthing this “...nationwide political art movement” (p. 12). He states, this pebble intersected with the proliferation of work by mostly “...young anti-establishment, skateboarder street artists [as it] was being layered into cities across the country” (p. 12). These renegades used money earned from early limited editions to print and ship thousands of prints to the early primary states for postering. He notes these “[n]ewly implemented agitprop activities used the cutting edge communication technologies that were now integral to the younger generations’ identity [such as] e-mail, the cell phone, video cameras, websites, iPods, YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, podcasts, [and] webisodes” (p. 12).

In the epilogue, Wert presents numerous examples of significant campaign posters from the 1820s to the present and provides context for the inception, decline and revival of campaign posters, throughout this nearly 200 year time period. Obviously as Wert reports, access to printing and the outreach potential of campaign posters mirrored the advancing technology in printing and mass communication in general, and responded to needs surrounding social and cultural movements and events. “The success of the Obama art movement mirrors past examples of other poster revival and street art actions—the difference today is how incredibly advanced our digital communication is, enabling an explosive impact” (p. 147). Wert also asserts that it is precisely these new technologies that are the new communication territory of the left and the young, which formed an overwhelming voting block for Obama (2009).



Figure 5: *Untitled*, sticker collage compiled by Billi Kid, courtesy of the author.

Given my fascination with and explorations of sticker art, (Keys, in press; 2008) my favorite (PR)Obama inspired image is one of two images repeated in the endpapers (Figure 5). This is a mixed-media sticker and collage work combining images from countless street artists compiled by Billi Kid. In addition to including street art forms, Wert offers a compelling and informative resource with many notable works of art⁷ compiled by the discerning eye and mind of a historian/collector and one that inspires inquiry into campaign and activist poster history, advances in technology and communication and the general role of political art in society. This high quality collection of fine art, graphically inclined images and alternative street art alongside the historical research and the generous artist index, push the comprehensive critical educational value of this resource well above the others.

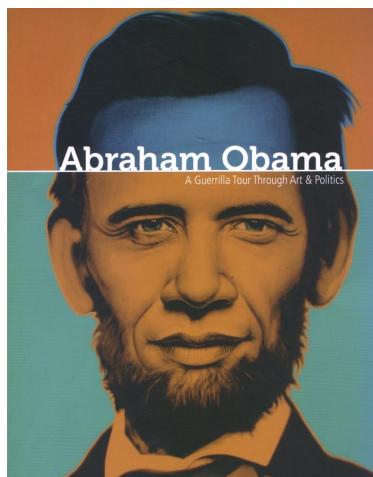


Figure 6: *Abraham Obama: A Guerilla Tour Through Art & Politics*, book cover, courtesy of the authors, artist, and Last Gasp Press. Cover art is a detail from *Abraham Obama*, by Ron English.

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Finally, *Abraham Obama: A Guerilla Tour Through Art and Politics* (Figure 6). explores content, meaning, and the adventures surrounding an important controversial image found in all three of the other collections. It chronicles sanctioned and non-sanctioned gallery installations and street art actions of the *Abraham Obama* image by Ron English. Originally an oil painting, the image which “blends the face of President Barack Obama with the iconic visage of Abraham Lincoln...” (p. i) has been re-printed, pasted and exhibited nationally and internationally in countless color schemes styles, sizes and in single or multiple tile versions, prior to and following the election. This mash-up references English’s interest which is not so much in their similarities, but in the complementary effect where “Obama completes Lincoln’s promise. The process of freeing the slaves culminates in a black president” (English in Goede & English, p. 1).

English, like Fairey discusses his usual inclination to make art that opposes something. Normally known for cleverly critiquing corporate irresponsibility, authority, the status quo, etc., he thought “...the idea of supporting Obama through art was intriguing” (p. 1). Similar to Fairey, he mentions, the polite request from the Obama campaign to stay ‘super-positive’, comments that any type of vetting is antithetical to his typical approach, but capitulates, and becomes “...in favor of a completely legal, positive effort” (p. 1) in support of Obama. Although English followed the proper procedures receiving gallery invitations or gaining permissions to install mural size installations of *Abraham Obama* in several locations, threats and attempts at lawsuits resulted around the mass public postings of smaller free images of *Abraham Obama* handed out at gallery receptions and made available for download on the Internet. One such lawsuit in Colorado Springs citing illegal campaigning “...was dismissed when an arts commission and the city declared the *Abraham Obama* images were art, not political propaganda” (p. 5).

Critic and urban designer, Mark Faverman further examines the significance of *Abraham Obama*. His generous essay, *Boston ~ Abraham Obama Morphs Art and Politics: Ephemeral Public Art in a Time of Angst*, reprinted from bershirefinearts.com, chronicles the adventure of the initial commission and installation of *Abraham Obama* by Gallery XIV in Boston (Figure 7). He qualifies this image as a “transcendent postmodern visual statement” (Faverman in Goede & English, 2009, p. 11) due to art intertwining with politics and its universally resonant existence. He compares its significance with other great political art by Francisco Goya, Pablo Picasso, and Diego Rivera. Faverman draws intriguing metaphors with the layering and ephemeral nature of the outdoor installations comparing them to the way our society and body politic are formed. He says *Abraham Obama* is a “...counter-message to the rather buttoned-down post 9/11 lack of criticism fostered by the Bush Administration’s national security mantra of no question, no protest” (p. 15). Faverman alone references the possible dangers of the over-elevation of a popular and increasingly powerful figure asking whether Ron English is saying something else through *Abraham Obama*. He asks, “Is the artist saying that the Obama supporters should beware as well? (p. 15).

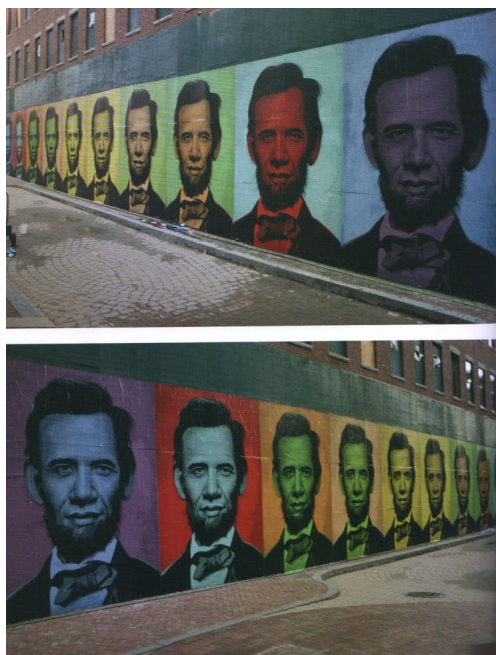


Figure 7: *Abraham Obama*, by Ron English, courtesy of the authors, artist and Last Gasp Press.

Carlo McCormick's afterword, *Myth & Metaphor*, spends time examining the relational need for a myth of a new American Dream present in Obama resonating deeply with artists who want change, thus striking an implied and almost reciprocal balance between the President and the 'liberal' creative community. This quid pro quo development according to McCormick, consists of recognizing two things. The first that Obama knowingly employed the arts, and artists' status quo interrogation methods as "...masters of coercion and control..." (McCormick in Goede & English, 2009, p. 84) as aesthetic tools of propaganda, and "to speak as surrogates for a dream too abstract for governmental discourse..." (p. 84). The second is that in their reward for work in supporting Obama, artists are energized, reconnected and freshly networked into a new scene of possibility and quasi-liberal community activism. From this new base of power, however, it seems a slippery slope until members of the progressive arts community build enough influence to become a full-fledged lobbying group. Do these larvae stage activist-lobbyists feel like Obama owes them something? The recent NEA and arts community 'conference call' scandal (Davis, 2009a, 2009b) in which arts organizations and groups eligible for federal arts support were seemingly agreeing to push the three aforementioned Obama administration platforms in their upcoming artistic work have borne the appearance of impropriety and have surfaced some of these similar fears.

Abraham Obama: A Guerilla Tour Through Art and Politics is an important resource and the one ranking second of these four offerings in its value for art educators. Serving as documentation of a larger than life art and propaganda project, this is an example of the kind of books we need to share with our students about becoming serious about art making. Regrettably, the brief comparisons drawn between Obama and Lincoln provide the foundation for English's thought provoking artwork, but leave much more for the rest of us to explore.

Overall within the (PR)Obama art and propaganda movement the mobilization of certain members

of the arts community in support of a progressive cause in Obama is impressive and has resulted in a surfeit of artistic and graphic works. I am not, however, without concerns about where this claimed and enacted empowerment in support of a newly elected power base that has now become the state will lead. We cannot name this artistic support as critical protest or questioning of the prior administration or status quo politics, or even as actuated democracy. Rather, it is emphatic and intensified (PR)Obama propaganda. In fact, signs of a 'group think' mentality implying a 'you are either for us or against us' stance among fervent Obama supporters was evident during and following the campaign. I suppose this is expected in any kind of plot to get 'like-minded' people together. However, as Courrielche (2009) reminds us, an artists job is to speak to power, not on behalf of it and "...regardless of political affiliation, the art community must embrace all rational dissenters. Art must not exclusively serve the interests of any presidential administration" (p. 2). And yet in these four cases, it seems clearly to do just that.

Examples of defensive and hypocritical responses surrounding visual works perceived to be non (PR)Obama or anti-Obama are important to review. Consider *Blessing*⁸, by David Cordero, a School of the Art Institute of Chicago student's figurative sculptural and neon work displaying Obama as the Messiah complete with halo, robes and the comforting gesturing of a deity. Or the once mysterious *Obama Joker*⁹ image, now attributed to Firas Alkhateeb. There was outrage from both religious groups and (PR)Obama supporters citing the audacity of artists to suggest these righteous (biblical) or harsh (fictional) comparisons. More drastic perhaps, are the recently surfacing collections of anti-Obama paraphernalia and visual culture surrounding the term coined Obamunism¹⁰—a word play in response to the Obama administration's continuation of two wars, and a misconnection by conservatives of its assertive movements toward healthcare reform with visual symbols of socialism and communism.

Adding to the mainly traditional media of the (PR)Obama movement represented in these four resources (with the exception of alternative street art and its actions), is a book exploring quilt making around fervent support of Obama as artistic content (Mazloomi, in press). Or consider the diverse approach of multiple praise paintings honoring Obama by Ghanian artists (Cosentino, 2009). Additionally while odd, surprising, and sometimes humorous we must also welcome and consider the visual culture exemplars of the Obama Chia Pet¹¹, Obama LSD Blotter Paper,¹² and Barack Obama Ecstasy pills,¹³ and most recently, heroin,¹⁴ because "oh What a long, strange trip it's been" (Garcia, Weir, Lesh & Hunter, 1970, track 10) and will continue to be as we wait for the next (PR)Obama art manifestations to appear and evolve.¹⁵

The plethora of ostensibly progressive political propaganda from these four primary sources clearly communicates to us that our society is undoubtedly ready for change and promise of a different approach to leadership. More specifically, it attests that many artists were ready enough for change to visually advocate for it. As such, I am logically inclined to believe that this outpouring of (PR)Obama artwork was orchestrated within several communities by a complex layering of players, organized events and strategy built in part by grassroots, populist and artist coalition driven initiatives. But, furthered mainly by powered and privileged art world stakeholders—some which were intermixed with interest or at the very least, response and blessings from the official campaign to move forward 'positively'. Outlaw turned insider art star, Fairey led the coalition of the

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progressive fine art groupings, Perry-Zucker called forth to the professional graphic design community, Hal Wert affords us with a broader and more historical contextualization of this movement stemming collectively from fine, graphic, and street art, and Ron English and Don Goede document the journeys of the seminal *Abraham Obama* artwork.

Perhaps however, this Obama art movement is not so unprecedented after all. Obama as brand and showing support for the ‘change’ candidate is easy for the ‘liberal’ or ‘progressive’ artist and viewer. And, the desperation and disillusionment some feel about the state of the United States is easily coddled and assuaged by social-realist or activist inspired artwork because it gives off a sense of clear (and right) vision and direction. Creating the next painting/print of Obama alongside progressive leaders from history, or restating text from his speeches also seems is too easy. As Fairey and English demonstrate, it is very easy to believe you are right, when you finally believe there is something or someone worth believing in. This attitude, however, exemplified by self-proclaimed renegade artists all too willing to take up a role in visual coercive actions themselves rather than critically investigating them, is similarly way too easy. In fact, given the variables of a perceived silencing of questioning and social critique during the Bush years, the easy content and selling factors of brand Obama to ‘liberal’ and/or ‘change’ seeking artists, and the technological advancements in fast and mass communication—would we expect any less to occur?

Upon reflection, I posit that the development of this art, propaganda, actions and exhibitions, was indeed the absolute least those involved could do from their advanced place and power of privilege. And, to be perfectly honest, I expect more from artists, organizers, educators, our society and myself who claim they want to work for social change in unprecedented ways. My main and most ardent critique of these resources is that the artists and organizers documented did not commit to making art or organizing events that asked more significant and complex questions of our society, politics, candidates, and elucidate possibilities for change, and instead chose to produce propaganda that pushes singular ideas. What are these artists for other than Obama, and the three proposed Obama campaign initiatives?

As Carlo McCormick suggests, this visual outcry asked us to suspend our belief in Obama (Goede & English, 2009) or in other words *trust* him. Many influential people have thus stepped onto the proverbial bandwagon with their artistic production, and organizing. As a result they manipulated and/or reinforced inclinations for many to suspend belief and faith in Obama. I worry that as time moves forward, this suspension may actually stall the rebirth of critical, socially and politically engaged and activist artwork, (not just propaganda) that may indeed influence progress toward social justice and the vital discourse surrounding it. In relation to recent reactions to Obama’s orders sending more US troops to Afghanistan, and his untimely and simultaneous acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize, this suspension of trust and belief may be dislodged for many. I wonder what indeed the artwork of resistance and referencing broken promises looks like and frankly, this is the type of ‘progressive’ art I look forward to, art and propaganda that speaks to the government rather than for it, and from and to the people for the greater benefit of all. Art that motivates rebuilding, and actually is successful in changing the way we see things. Art that makes people create coalitions to persuade their neighbors, elected leaders and government to address the real humanitarian needs of society. Artwork that can inspire leaders and a citizenry to recognize and seize the

challenge to complete all of the hard work that still remains undone.

The discussion of universally resonant historical and contemporary examples inciting change are beyond the purview of this review, yet a sampling may be investigated within Exit Art's exhibition entitled, *Signs of Change: Social Movement Cultures 1960s to Now*¹⁶ from late 2008. Additionally, reviewing the art, lessons, and actions brought about by activist artists of the recent past that are as Lippard (1999) reminds us, awkwardly and almost entirely left out of the history of art, is extremely important to future artistic practice and societal growth as it pertains to change. It is precisely these types of continued issue and social context-based works and practices¹⁷ that are needed to alter the course of our societal evolution.

Even though the artists and artworks do not meet my rigorous expectations for the role of artists (activists) in society and the production of social change related artwork, the four resources reviewed do provide visual and contextual starting points for building further inquiry within socially and culturally concerned art education practice. Although this review negates the unprecedented nature of the outpouring of visual support for Obama as documented in these resources, in favor of calling for more critical work from artists and organizations, nonetheless their exploration generates multiple new questions for our reflection upon society, the political system in the U.S., and tolerance for visual support and dissent related to such matters. Additionally, their review greatly assisted in the development of the questioning strategies and activity ideas below.

Suggested Questions for Critical Art Education Practice

As a potentially informative qualitative pre-and post-test for various levels, ask students to write a paragraph about what they know or believe to be true about Obama and his campaign platforms, prior to viewing and exploring these images?

Then after reviewing, consuming, and spending time with the visual examples ask students to complete additional writing about how their original beliefs were challenged, loosened, confirmed, or otherwise changing after viewing the images. Make room for current events and other Obama related visual culture examples to be considered.

How may images affect support for or against a political candidate, figure or other individual?

How has technology formally and informally influenced political campaigning? What analytic strategies do we use to decode these visual languages? What are the messages of specific images? Are these images art, propaganda, or something else?

What do you think the role of this type of visual work was in retaining, changing or encouraging votes for Obama? How do you think that the works helped undecided voters? Who actually viewed this work prior to the election? How do you feel about consuming visual propaganda?

In what ways do artists' style and use of media reflect or connect with younger, more progressive and possibly 'liberal' or 'alternative' citizens?

Will artists continue to assist in the visual casting of a progressive vision in support of Obama as campaign promises are broken or adapted? When does a continuing yet unrequited platform of hope,

Keys, K. (2010) (PR)Obama Art and Propaganda. Un(precedent)ED Visual Collections of Hope, Progress, and Change? The Journal of Social Theory In Art Education (30) (R. Sweeny, Ed.). 116-134.

change and progress become the status quo?

What may happen in the 'liberal' creative community if patience for the fulfillment of Obama's promises starts to fade or run out, and what will art that expresses these sentiments look like? Will these be considered positive, or blasphemous or anti-American? How will they be received by the mainstream media?

Will dissenting art work or work that does not 'stay positive' appear? Will it be discussed, or silenced?

How can what we learn about (PR)Obama images be applied to our general understandings of the Obama administration or to other presidential administrations?

How do you see these or other artists working within this movement as serving either as public intellectuals and/or as tools of the state?

How might you individually or collectively create socially responsive art that deals with difficult issues and suggests changes for our society?

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¹ (PR)Obama is an alision coined by the author to suggest the intensity and fervor of the pro-Obama visual art movement.

² Notable works from: *Art for Obama: Designing "Manifest Hope" and the Campaign for Change:*
Hussein, David Choe (pp. 74-75).
Kenyan-American, Tatyana Fazlalizadeh (p. 37).
Obama Portrait, Herb Williams (p. 81).
Tears of Hope, Andrew Bannecker (p. 35).
The Great Communicator, (That One) Justin Hampton (p. 147).
The Hopeful Hearts Club, Michael Cuffe (p. 173).

³ To access Fairey's *Hope*, go to: http://mediacontender.com/images/posts/shepard-fairey_hope.jpg

⁴ Justin Hampton maintains that the correct title of this artwork is *That One*, referencing John McCain's derogatory comment toward Obama in the 2008 2nd Presidential debate.

⁵ Go to: <http://designforobama.org/index.php?p=619>

⁶ Notable works from: *Design for Obama:*
Barack Star, Nick DeCarlo (p. 27).
Obama Superman, Mr. Brainwash (p.48).
Untitled, Patrick Gallo & Mike Pintar (p.36).
In Progress, Gordon Sang (cover art & p. 169).

⁷ Notable works from *Hope: A Collection of Obama Posters and Prints:*
Untitled-collages, Billi Kid (endpapers & p.14).
American Presidential Wrestling Heavyweight Championships, Kevin Bradley (p. 27).
Progress, Scott Hansen (p.56).
Obama Extended, Matt Dye (p. 81).
Warrior Politics, David Macaluso (p.121).

⁸ To see *Blessing* by David Cordero go to: http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2007-04-02-obama-statue_N.htm

⁹ See <http://www.ktla.com/news/landing/ktla-obama-posters.0,940643.story>

¹⁰ See <http://www.ep.tc/obamunism.html>

¹¹ See <https://www.chiaobama.com/flare/next>

¹² See <http://www.boingboing.net/2009/12/02/obama-acid.html>

¹³ See <http://www.cbsnews.com/blogs/2009/12/02/crimesider/entry5864845.shtml>

¹⁴ Go to: <http://www.thesmokinggun.com/archive/years/2009/0123091obama1.html>

¹⁵ To review the latest in (PR)Obama art movement manifestations visit: <http://obamaartreport.com/> OR :
<http://www.artofobama.com/>

¹⁶ Go to: http://www.exitart.org/site/pub/exit_archive/history/2008.html

Signs of Change presented hundreds of posters, photographs, moving images, audio clips, and ephemera that brought to life over forty years of activism, political protest, and campaigns for social justice.. (www.exitart.org)

¹⁷ For examples of activist artists who create issue-based please review: Enrique Chagoya, Sue Coe, Guillermo Gomez-Pena, Mel Chin, Barbara Kruger, Guerrilla Girls, and myriad activist artists, collectives, and organizations discussed by Lippard (1999).