Street artist Shepard Fairey paints a giant mural in Detroit

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3 June 2015

On May 22, street artist Shepard Fairey, designer of the ubiquitous Barack Obama "HOPE" poster during the 2008 presidential election campaign, completed a gigantic mural in downtown Detroit. The untitled work stands 185 feet tall by 55 feet wide, adorning the north face of the One Campus Martius office building, headquarters of Quicken Loans, the financial company chaired by multibillionaire Dan Gilbert. The mural, which can be seen from miles away, was commissioned by Bedrock, Gilbert's real estate firm.

At the center of the mural is a portion of a man's face inside a five-point star. Encircling him is a flower-like pattern that has the precise radial symmetry of a kaleidoscope or "paper snowflake." The whole thing is rendered as though through a stencil, with stark black lines swirling "tribal"-tattoo-like through completely flat square or triangular fields of red and beige. The man whose face is in the mural is the late French professional wrestling performer and movie actor André "The Giant" Roussimoff (*Wrestlemania III*, *The Princess Bride*). Mouthless, he confronts us with a thousand-yard stare. A peace sign and a scales-of-justice are stamped in the top corners of the wall.

A mural is a profoundly social art form. A blank wall becomes an artistic backdrop for a real social interaction. The ideas of the artist, visually expressed through the content of the mural, become a permanent or semi-permanent feature of public life. Detroit is home to scores of murals, including Diego Rivera's legendary *Detroit Industry Murals*. Many of these works seek to beautify, probe or explain life. A mural, of course, can also be used to falsify or distort the truth, or simply avoid important problems.

Fairey's mural is without significant meaning in itself, as well as completely unrelated to its surroundings—and, frankly, an eyesore to boot. The work is likely to confound viewers who are not familiar with Fairey's oeuvre and outlook.

Fairey (born in Charleston, South Carolina in 1970) graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1992. In 1989 he began placing stickers in public spaces featuring the face of André the Giant, apparently traced or photocopied from an existing promotional poster. Fairey later modified the image, alternately placing the face in a star or appending the word "OBEY." Today these serve as his logos, and they appear in most of his works.

In a manifesto written in 1990 (which cites right-wing philosopher Martin Heidegger in its opening lines), after asserting that "The OBEY sticker attempts to stimulate curiosity and bring people to question both the sticker and their relationship with their surroundings [In what way? To what end?]," Fairey notes that the image of Roussimoff "has no meaning."

The manifesto goes on to state that certain people "find the image itself amusing, recognizing it as nonsensical, and are able to derive straightforward visual pleasure without burdening themselves with an explanation. The PARANOID OR CONSERVATIVE VIEWER however may be confused," and "condemn it as an underground cult with subversive intentions." Some other viewers, one might add, may simply be left entirely cold by the image. The 1990 manifesto still serves as the "About" section of Fairey's professional website and, as we shall see, it is relevant to his work today.

Since that time, Fairey has largely made a career out of copying existing images, adjusting them slightly or not at all, and passing them off as his own. Artist and critic Mark Vallen, on his Art for a Change website, provides a damning exposure of Fairey's practices. Vallen shows that Fairey has taken images from

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Hollywood films, newspaper photographs, turn of the century Art Nouveau designs, various twentieth century propaganda posters and military insignia, postcards, etc.

Fairey once designed a T-shirt featuring the logo of the Nazi Gestapo and the word "OBEY." He also added "OBEY" to a copy of a 1920 recruitment poster for the Red Army, designed by Dmitri Moor. He apparently makes no distinction between the significance of the Bolshevik Revolution and the Third Reich.

The opening of Fairey's solo exhibition in Detroit at the nearby Bedrock-owned "The Belt" outdoor alleyway gallery coincided with the completion of the downtown mural. On display until August 22 are five large panels, ranging from 64 to 96 square feet, in addition to a second, smaller mural. Thematically united, these works take up, or appear to take up, social issues of the day such as war, mass surveillance and the destruction of the environment by major corporations.

However, an examination of any one of these works will not yield a single serious insight into its subject matter. Fairey's goal actually seems to be to confuse and to banalize issues which, unless understood and confronted head-on by masses of people, threaten the destruction of the planet. His art, despite its surface appearance of social and public engagement, is profoundly noncommittal, and that makes it acceptable to the Dan Gilberts of this world.

On a panel titled Earth Crisis, white lines that are at once like tears and like radio waves extend downward from a large, stylized human eye to envelop a tiny planet Earth. The panel next to it, Decoding Disinformation, contains an undoubtedly borrowed image of a man's face, brow furrowed menacingly. A red logo in the corner reads "THE BUREAU OF COVERT PROPAGANDA."

The existence of government agencies tasked with disseminating disinformation and spying on the entire world is incontrovertible. But what of it? What are the causes or effects of this fact that everyone knows? If we apply the philosophy of Fairey's above-quoted manifesto to his panel, we ought to "recognize it as nonsensical" and "derive straightforward pleasure without burdening ourselves with an explanation." This type of passivity can be an excuse for almost anything.

(Does Fairey know, by the way, that Gilbert has a privately-owned network of hundreds of surveillance cameras across downtown Detroit, which have been used recently to witch-hunt teenagers who spraypainted their names in an alley?)

A panel called Society for the Preservation of Destruction features a hodgepodge of images such as a faux advertisement for a bullhorn that shouts the word "OBEY," and a can of spray paint that creates a coup d'état. The apparent message is that protesting against existing conditions actually leads to more oppression and violence. What, then, is one to do? Ironically detach oneself from reality?

Detroit is a city of immense and almost unbearable social contradictions. At the same time that billionaires are renovating downtown into an upscale enclave, tens of thousands of the city's poorest are having their water shut off. The ruling class will do or say anything to prevent masses of people, whom they hate and fear, from coming to an understanding of the situation and waging an independent struggle against it. Artists who don't fight to understand and reveal the truth of the world can be swept up in all kinds of sinister projects.

Fairey, discussing his continuing support for President Obama in a recent interview in *Esquire* magazine, set out his viewpoint: "I hate to say Americans are ignorant and lazy, but a lot of them are ignorant and lazy." He offers them ignorant and lazy art.

The author recommends:

A revealing forum on "Politics and film criticism" at Mexican film festival

[6 April 2015]

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