

# WHAT'S ART GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Politically engaged art is often criticized. Should artists not represent their political cause with all their creative power? Here are some thoughts about the need for new forms of artistic propaganda.



**I**t was an image that had the internet buzzing. It was an artistic image as political propaganda and pop-culture phenomenon. The American artist Shepard Fairey started his work in the 1990s with skateboarding, punk, and street art. The iconic graphic design of his sticker campaign, “Andre the Giant Has a Posse,” made him famous beyond the country’s borders. Fairey went on to design a poster motif for Barack Obama during the U.S. presidential campaign. He sympathized with Obama’s ideas, and he knew a few of the leading figures in the campaign. His poster, initially printed in a run of a few hundred copies, became a viral, worldwide success and a symbol of Obama’s entire presidency.

<sup>1</sup>  
Shepard Fairey  
2009, poster of President  
Barack Obama

“I knew my biggest challenge was to portray Obama as both an exciting progressive and a mainstream patriot with vision,” said Fairey. “I decided to make a portrait of Obama largely because I felt his power and sincerity as a speaker would create a positive association with his likeness. I wanted it to be a portrait that was political in nature and that would deracialize Obama by using a red, white, and blue color palette that was patriotic.” Fairey’s works are very consciously influenced by the masters of Soviet propaganda, Russian constructivism, and socialist realism. And the influence of Soviet-style propaganda is growing right across contemporary art, graphic design, and advertising in Western culture.

Soviet propaganda was successful because it adopted the color schemes, illustration styles, formats, and iconography that were familiar to the general public. The artists appropriated the visual lexicon of the masses, which relied heavily on religious iconography that had been applied by the Russian Orthodox Church and the Tsarist regime. They started with a visual language that everyone was familiar with and added new meanings to this old, widely accepted set of symbols.

But this is also where the problem lies. Propaganda has a bad reputation. Propaganda is a political activity with the goal of maintaining and spreading power. It is always associated with dictatorship and totalitarianism, like communist propaganda in Soviet Russia that was primarily based on Marxism-Leninism ideology to promote the Communist Party line. Artists employed by the state would produce posters, stencils, and lithographs that were not only beautiful, but that could influence the opinion of the population.

Propaganda as a manipulative presentation of one-sidedly selected content, combined with goals of political influence, has a tainted reputation, particularly because of the abuse taken to the extreme in Stalinism and National Socialism. The problem always lies in the appropriation. “What is important is not what fascist or democrat, political gangster or philanthropist considers to be art, what values they uphold, what ideas and goals they proclaim, but in what way they make use of the art and the values,” says the art theorist Bazon Brock.