

Maud Lavin

*Clean New World*

*Culture, Politics, and Graphic Design*

## Introduction

This book is about who gets to say what to whom. It's about who has the means to communicate, the power and money to get a message across, the passion and humor to speak, the openness and confidence to participate in dialogue rather than monologue. In aiming these questions at graphic design and the related areas of advertising, corporate identity programs, Web sites, and political photomontages and posters, I am looking in particular at cottage-industry images printed, broadcast, projected, or digitally transmitted in mass markets. I want to know what happens to private visions in public forums. For me and for others, graphic design is an umbrella field, defined broadly as mass visual communication and more fully as "an art form that depends for its efficacy on the degree to which words and images communicate a coherent message."<sup>1</sup> For the most part, it's a hard-working service field, a field that sees itself more occupied with translating speech into visual language than speaking. It is client- and product-oriented. Many of its corporate-client practitioners are instructed to provide order and clarity, to give their clients' companies the look, sheen, and promise of a clean new world. It's a fairly neurotic expectation, since designers can't really clean—they just cover, wrap, accent, or put into a clean envelope some messy realities. Typically, no in-depth communication exists in corporate design graphics. For me, graphic design fascinates, then, because it is a bizarre example of hamstrung power. In corporate service, design's most common function, it is implicated in both cultural stasis and change, but with only partial control.

# 1

A while ago in Minneapolis, I was on a panel with Ivan Chermayeff, a principal in the design firm of Chermayeff/Geismar. A star in the field, Chermayeff looked the part of the handsomely aging artist: tall, rangy, with longish hair and expensively understated clothes. Chermayeff was well known for, among other things, having redesigned Mobil's corporate graphics. His waves of clean gasoline sloshing inside the orange O were then seen by millions of people. But as we started to talk in the panel about how that image and its related identity program did and did not relate to what Mobil actually does as a corporation, Chermayeff grew uneasy. He didn't really know or didn't want to talk about what Mobil did. His task was to concentrate on the details of its look. Here was someone who had tremendous power to communicate visually and no power whatsoever to influence the content. And here was a field, graphic design, bent like most fields around self-justification, forced to talk formal visual issues and ignore its own impotency.

Because graphic design is so powerful and so warped (in most commercial practice) in its ability to communicate, it provides an exaggerated model for the same questions that dog other communication fields like photography, film, the Internet, and my own field, writing. Who really has a voice in our culture? Do we have public forums that are democratic, alive, open, fun, able to make a difference? Or are too many of our public spaces bought and closed off: the town square where speeches were protected by the First Amendment now deserted in favor of the shopping mall where private owners determine what is said in advertising spaces; the cacophony of public-access cable ceding to HBO; anything resembling porn on the Net potentially censored by schools and libraries; reporters, TV news anchors, graphic designers, and others hired to condense and deliver messages but to keep their own mouths shut.

Of course, like most people, graphic designers don't like keeping their mouths shut. For financial reasons, the same designers will often work on corporate graphics and on alternative, self-generated projects. So, this book is not only about communication questions, but also about the historical and contemporary track record of graphics in making powerful political statements, in functioning as intriguing personal creations,

and in consciously influencing cultural norms. It looks back to the 1920s, to the outspoken designers who rode the first wave of mass media pervading the everyday—to Kurt Schwitters and the *neue ring's* Weimar designs, to Studio ringl + pit's ironic advertising images of women. It then moves to the history of U.S. corporate design and the positioning of designers like Will Golden, Paul Rand, and Sheila Levrant de Bretteville inside and outside corporate sponsorship. What do we do for money and what for love? What to pay the rent and what to make a difference? These urgent questions are filtered through design practices.

Some of these questions are answered by the ornery voices of people like Barbara Kruger and Stephen Kroninger, people who work with words, images, political and media references, anger, and humor. They can't be easily classified as artists, designers, or illustrators. Barbara Kruger refers to herself as an artist who works with images and words and not as a designer, but she is included in this book because she uses graphic design techniques, has influenced designers, and, most important, regularly uses mass-distribution systems for her visual editorializing. Stephen Kroninger has been variously described as a collagist, an illustrator, and a caricaturist; he, too, brings his personal voice into mass-media distribution. This role has been particularly difficult to achieve in recent decades when media monopolization has made it harder to get private voices publicly aired.

Nevertheless, it's a time when women have at last come to the fore of the graphic design field. Yet they still earn less than their male counterparts. Perhaps because of the continuing economic inequity with design firms, women designers who do self-generated as well as corporate work have turned increasingly to a mix of teaching and self-employment structures that combine to create semi-independent, multitasking practices. Such multitasking in turn has provided a persuasive model for the field as a whole. I offer a portfolio here of the work of some leading female designers who by and large work for institutional and corporate clients and in addition have a strong record of self-expressive work and/or public service—designers like Lorraine Wild, Rebeca Méndez, and Fo Wilson. Others like Peggy Weil, an interactive media artist, have used

both images and words to question social and aesthetic effects of what public-distribution cultural systems and image makers do.

And what they do goes way beyond the limits of a given field. Our culture is dominated by the visual, so mass-distribution image makers influence what political issues we as a society discuss—why we talk about crime, for instance, and not overpopulation. In the chapter “A Baby and a Coat Hanger,” I look at how imagery came to dominate the brochures and ads of both sides of the abortion issue and at how the rise of fetal imagery changed the abortion debate, in fact narrowed it dramatically, and I imagine how other images could broaden the discussion. In the section on the Internet, I examine how computer graphics influence whether we computer users feel controlled or in control, like plugged-in consumers or creative wanderers and discussants. These questions become most pointed in the case of intelligent agents, programs that monitor our use of the computer and then fetch research and do business transactions for us. Do they represent or repress our speech? The flowering of private thoughts and desires then can be controlled very close to home, even in our use of that increasingly common communication tool, the computer. Can we talk to ourselves uninterrupted? How can the relatively free play of design, words, and images on the Web lead to exploration of individual personae and community interaction? In the last chapter in this Internet section, which focuses on my participation in the cyberdrama *The Couch*, I unravel some received wisdom about these self-representation questions and assert a new, two-sided blueprint for forming personae on the Web.

Issues of the Internet return again to the main question of the book—the fate and look of private expressions in public forums. Can we express ourselves and talk to others with full displays of peacock feathers, unruly emotions, difficult politics, broad humor, keen elegance, information overload, and bad taste? Will graphic design contribute by revealing complexity or reducing for clarity, or both? Will communication remain kaleidoscopic? Or will all of this creative, transformative mess become increasingly filtered and clean?



I see design—in its usual forms—as a hamstrung power in visual culture, but also a practice whose potential reach has remained largely unacknowledged by the critical field that set out to analyze it. Design history and criticism is a very young field, it has only existed as a regular presence in universities and art schools since the 1970s. Most writing on design has been preoccupied with analyzing design products, compiling designer biographies, and developing a historical narrative of style influences. There is, on the one hand, a desire to catalog basic information about design that itself is quite young as a pervasive practice, born as a largely unacknowledged technique in advertising in the nineteenth century, with a growth spurt and recognition as a profession in the 1920s, and not really burgeoning until its widespread corporate sponsorship after World War II. On the other hand, creating a style lexicon and a design canon also fits with the service mentality of how design is usually practiced: such writing is useful in the marketplace as resource material for designers.

I'm convinced, though, that writing about design needs to do more than this. So one contribution of this book is to approach design from the broader field of visual culture criticism and ask ambitious questions about power and communication. In writing about these issues, I aim to stir discussion, talk that does not merely react to the state of design as it is commonly practiced but instead is generative: encouraging designers to recognize and deal creatively with the cultural power they do, in fact, have.

My questions come at a particular point in the evolution of design history and also design practice. Design historians and critics have begun to open their writing to interdisciplinary approaches, thus acknowledging the multifaceted face of design and, not coincidentally, expanding its audience and discourse. Curator and designer Ellen Lupton did this with her 1993 Cooper-Hewitt exhibition *Mechanical Brides: Women and Machines from Home to Office*, where she brought together issues of product and graphic design with women's history.<sup>2</sup> There is a parallel. Recently for the designer, professional competition and technological diversity have encouraged a multitasking role. Typically, today's designer might

provide a corporation with a visual identity, a mission statement, a Web site, a brochure, other advertising, and a trade exhibition presence—in short, a visual persona in the market. This diversity may still mean that the designer is curtailed in what he or she can say in a given corporate context, but it sets a pattern for a wide-ranging cultural involvement that the designer can pursue aggressively in his or her own work.

Today design sits at the intersection of cottage-industry cultural production, corporate sponsorship, and mass-distribution systems, such as magazines or the Internet, which are dominated by the visual. It papers our world, and its paper trail tells us much about how culture is funded and disseminated. It helps formulate our norms and even the speed with which those norms are constantly recast, much as corporate identities and publicly aired individual identities are now rapidly retooled. Yet, ironically, there is still much more writing about high art like painting or mass culture like TV than about design—even though it is design that operates as a kind of visual “fluid” connecting these other cultural products, selling them, and keeping them circulating, while also communicating its own messages.

We can't afford to ignore design's operations in a broader social and cultural context: design is a key marker in the historical shifts of institutions of funding, distribution, competitive reception, and audience. For instance, if writing about design were to be restricted to looking at styles, we would miss the important economic structural differences between, say, John Heartfield's monthly creations of covers for the popular photoneewsweekly *AIZ* in Germany in the twenties and the design of explicitly political Web sites today. Looking through an economic lens, we see that today the mass print and broadcast media are monopolized and Web audiences are splintered. These two conditions together frustrate a broad participation in democratic discourse through the articulation of visual and verbal editorial voices.

I view my essays as part of a shift in current writing about design, one that connects design to overarching questions of visual culture. Conversely, those of us who write about design need to be careful not to repeat the traditional silences of the field, silences about the opportu-



nities and also inhibitions of corporate sponsorship, about the changes in corporations and the marketplace (for instance, the current corporate pressure to rapidly adjust identities) about forms and forums that are open to cultural producers, about interactions with viewers who are also producers on the Web. Therefore, I've been exploring exactly these areas of power, economics, and audience in design and drawing connections to other cultural practices.

My own experience as cultural critic and my thinking about issues of private cultural practice and mass-distribution systems has influenced my writing over time. So the early, historical chapters in this book were written when my writing was in a more distanced mode. These involve a dialogue between my own contemporary interests and scholarly research in the historically specific conditions of the 1920s. Then as I moved to writing more about contemporary issues, I began to develop a style that was more personal and that directly engaged the reader. I explored as well varied forums of distribution, writing for *Harper's Bazaar* and for the activist group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, for example, as well as Yale University Press. In these different venues, I also sounded out how different forms played in different forums as well as how different opportunities and curtailments existed with the different economics of each media situation. Broadly speaking, my role as a critic shifted from that of an observer writing in the third person to that of an observer-participant, particularly in the Internet essays, writing in the first person. Even in the earlier writings, I never pretended objectivity although I retained respect for historical research and context. In the more recent essays, I examine my own participation along with broader cultural developments. By adding this intimacy, I gained the challenge of writing about culture in a multilevel way and explored creative and varied forms of writing. As a writer for the cyberdrama *The Couch* for a year and a half, I was involved in the design of the site, working with designer David Steuer and the rest of the group, as well as with the evolution of its words and images.<sup>3</sup>

I've thought of my own writing process as building a multitasked critical practice, one sensitive to different audiences, morphing aesthet-

ics, publishing economics, and evolving political debates. As a writer and cultural critic, I've published in a wide variety of venues, and my selection process of different forums has been motivated sometimes by love, sometimes by money, sometimes by both. My own span of cultural production—writing for large print-publishing companies like Hachette and small Internet servers like Cyborganic, the publisher of *The Couch*—mirrors the practices of many designers as well as other writers and other cultural producers today. So it is with the intensity of personal engagement as well as a sense of cultural timeliness and political necessity that I ask as a cultural critic about democratic, creative, personal, and profitable possibilities for speech in design and elsewhere. Using images and words, I want to explore who gets to say what to whom and how to expand the pleasure, democracy, and messiness of communication.

#### Notes

1. Mildred Friedman, *Graphic Design in America* (New York: Abrams, 1989), 9.
2. On the expansion of design history to a more interdisciplinary design studies, see Victor Margolin et al., special issue of *Design Issues* 11 (Spring 1995).
3. Peter Hall, "Log On Tomorrow" *Print Magazine* (May/June 1997) 52–57.

## Collectivism in the Decade of Greed:

### Political Art Coalitions in the 1980s in New York City

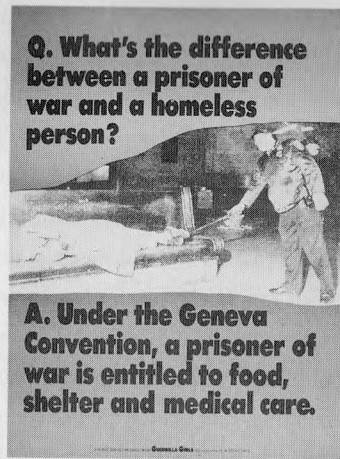
In 1979 the year twelve artists formed the collective Group Material, no one I knew took Ronald Reagan's bid for the presidency seriously. Even the centrist newspaper of record, *The New York Times*, was watching the early candidacies of George Bush and Howard Baker, not that of right-wing nut (as he was still then widely considered) Reagan. The signs for a national swing rightward were clear, though. Looking back now through the *Times* headlines from 1979 and with the aid of hindsight, it's easy to find many warnings reported. Anxiety about the economy and unemployment, scrambling to avert another energy crisis in the future, decline in auto sales and profits of other manufacturing industries, alarm over the hostage situation in Iran. Jimmy Carter was on his way out. And yet, at the same time, the last flickerings of a popular liberalism were visible; the 1979 *Times* also documents that the best-of-hippydom, women's health bible *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, by a feminist collective in Boston, was on the best-seller list and that federal National Endowment for the Arts grants were going increasingly to smaller, grass-roots cultural groups. This was the overarching political environment, then, in which members of Group Material including Julie Ault, Mundy McLaughlin, and Tim Rollins (key participants Doug Ashford and Felix Gonzales-Torres joined later) decided to open a community-based gallery in New York's East Village to address issues of culture and politics. The waning days of seventies liberalism marked

# 7

Group Material's open and inclusive character and, in general, encouraged the American Left's operative dream that a radical democracy situated even to the left of a status quo liberal model was possible.

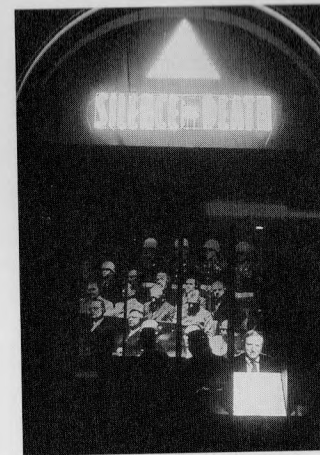
As the eighties progressed, though, and the United States endured the "conservative revolution" of two consecutive Reagan terms (1980–84, 1984–88) an expansive outreach position on the Left, one that presented alternative societal models, became almost untenable and/or restricted to extremely small constituencies. There was no liberal mainstream, and many leftist groups, art-based and otherwise, were forced to turn to patching up fast-disappearing social services. A radical vision of reconstructing the United States economically such as Marxism was shoved onto the back shelves of university libraries as even the most basic liberal ideas like funding social services with tax dollars were shredded by a rapacious turn toward pure capitalism. The effects of cutting social services like housing for the indigent and health insurance for the working poor became immediately apparent—although for the most part unprotested—as homeless people filled the streets and minimum wage workers fell into welfare to get health coverage. As many commentators on both the Left and Right have noted, the eighties was the decade when the rich got richer and the poor got poorer.

Yet, the sheer lack of government responsibility, the utter heartlessness of Reagan's hands-off approach, galvanized many artists, design activists, and intellectuals to fill the political void—or at least try to. This was evident across the country although most visible in New York City due to media coverage. Because both the art and print media worlds were so centralized in New York, particularly in this era just before the Internet took hold and loosened geographic cultural clustering, the majority of political art collectives that became most well known and most influential were New York-based. Not all collaborative groups sought to make an impact on everyday U.S. politics and society. Some were fairly traditional cooperations between artists in the marketplace. Others more commonly used techniques of design activism to act in concert as lobbying groups to influence either art world or governmental practices, or both.



Strategies changed in the eighties for art activists; specifically they used design techniques familiar from newspaper layouts and poster propaganda. Both Guerrilla Girls (founded in 1985) and Gran Fury (formed in 1988) coalesced primarily around single issues: the Guerrilla Girls to fight art-world gender- and race-based exclusions (fig. 7.1 Gran Fury to wage war on AIDS ignorance, intolerance, and inaction. It's not surprising that the activist artists and writers of Weimar Germany like John Heartfield, with their pragmatic, media-savvy approaches to resisting the encroachment of the far Right, became the intellectual heroes of eighties activist art groups in the United States, even at times providing the visual models for these New York City collaboratives.

Much more important, though, to 1980s art activism than looking back to the 1920s was the depletion of urban life quality (for all but the wealthy) under the Reagan and Bush administrations. For the Guerrilla Girls, the prosperity of some white male artists and exclusion of many in the eighties art world paralleled what was going on in the national economy. In the mid-eighties, for example, women in the United States earned on the average 60 cents to the dollar men earned, and two out of three adults living in poverty were female. For impoverished families, sta-



Opposite left: Guerrilla Girls, *Guerrilla Girls Review the Whitney*, poster exhibited at The Clocktower, New York, 1987. "A not-for-it gallery, The Clocktower, asked us to do a show during the Whitney Museum of American Art's Biennial in 1987. We were not expected us to do a show of art we thought should be in the biennial. Instead, we decided to do an exhibition of information exposing the museum's pathetic and worsening record on women and artists of color." (7.1)

Opposite right: Guerrilla Girls, *What's the difference between a prisoner of war and a homeless person?*, poster, 1991. (7.2)



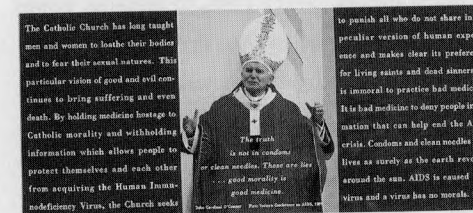
Above: Gran Fury, *Let the Record Show* window installation, Museum, New York, 1987 (7.3)

At left: Gran Fury, *Welcome to America*, poster, 1989. (7.4)

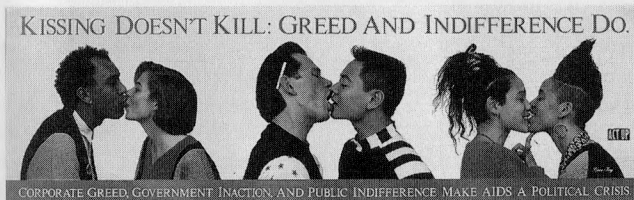


Gran Fury, *The Pope and the Penis*, two-part billboard, work was first exhibited in the Aperto exhibition that was part of the 1990 Venice Biennale.

Due to official questioning of the work as blasphemous, city magistrates eventually declared that it was not, and the billboard was delayed beyond the opening of the biennial and the works were allowed on the walls only later. (7.5)







*Kissing doesn't kill. Greed and indifference do,*  
1989.

tistics were worst for black and Latina mothers: 51.7 percent of black female-headed households were poor as were 53.4 percent of Latina families headed by single women. And once the Guerrilla Girls became firmly established as the self-proclaimed “conscience of the art world,” effectively finger-wagging and shaming museums and galleries into slowly starting to improve representation of women and minorities through unrelenting nighttime postering of New York City walls—called sniping—illegally wheat-pasting posters around the city—they increasingly turned to highlighting national problems. For example, a 1991 poster showed a homeless person and read. “Q. What’s the difference between a prisoner of war and a homeless person? A. Under the Geneva Convention, a prisoner of war is entitled to food, shelter and medical care” (fig. 7.2)

Gran Fury came on the scene as a kind of visual arts stepchild of the political group ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) ACT UP was founded primarily by gay charter members in 1987 the year Republican Senator Jesse Helms pushed through federal legislation refusing government funds for any educational materials that depict or condone homosexuality, the year after Reagan first mentioned AIDS in an official speech—six years at least into the epidemic, and a time, in general, when drug companies profited at the expense of PWAs (People with AIDS) and health insurance companies abandoned those at risk. In 1987 Bill Olander, curator at the New Museum, commissioned ACT UP members to do an installation in the museum’s front window space, *Let the Record Show* (fig. 7.3) and the public impact of that then-daring act was part of the

spur for the formation of a design/art group for AIDS awareness in January 1988 and the protest graphics of ten artists including designers Marlene McCarty and Donald Moffett, filmmaker Tom Kalin, and videomaker John Lindell (figs. 7.4, 7.5)

For the posters and pamphlets of the Guerrilla Girls and Gran Fury and their younger cousin WAC (Women’s Action Coalition) which came on the scene a few years later, the style was to cement a hard-hitting, single-image graphic (a female nude wearing a gorilla mask, two men kissing, or an unblinking eye, for example) with a didactic, advertising-like caption (“Do women have to be naked to get into the Met?” “Kissing doesn’t kill. Greed and indifference do” (fig. 7.6), and “WAC is watching,” respectively) Yet for all their design simplicity, these graphics were also inflected by traits commonly assigned to postmodernism. a sense of humor and play, use of irony, and blatant appropriation of other artistic styles. In particular, the work of Barbara Kruger was often quoted (for example, by Gran Fury, as noted by Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston in their 1990 book *AIDS Demographics*), although the collectives tended to detour around Kruger’s sophisticated use of ambiguity in works such as *You construct intricate rituals which allow you to touch the skin of other men to tap the straightforward style of her poster and media work such as her pro-choice poster *Your body is a battleground*. But the Left art world in the eighties searched for historical models as well, such as the radical twenties and thirties anti-Nazi graphics of John Heartfield.*

However, in industrialized countries, ownership of the mass media—publishing houses for newspapers, books, and magazines, production companies for TV and film—were considerably more monopolized and centralized in the 1980s than in the 1920s. For artists, illustrators, caricaturists, designers, cartoonists, and other visual editorialists to have the kind of voice Heartfield had in the late 1920s and early 1930s with his covers, appearing at a rate of approximately one per month for *AIZ (Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung—Workers’ Illustrated Newspaper)* one of Germany’s most popular newsweeklies, was almost unheard of, due to the limited public access monopolized print media provide. Perhaps Heartfield’s closest equivalents today in the United States would be Matt Groening, creator of



Group Material, Contribution to the 1985 Whitney Biennial,  
Whitney Museum of American Art.

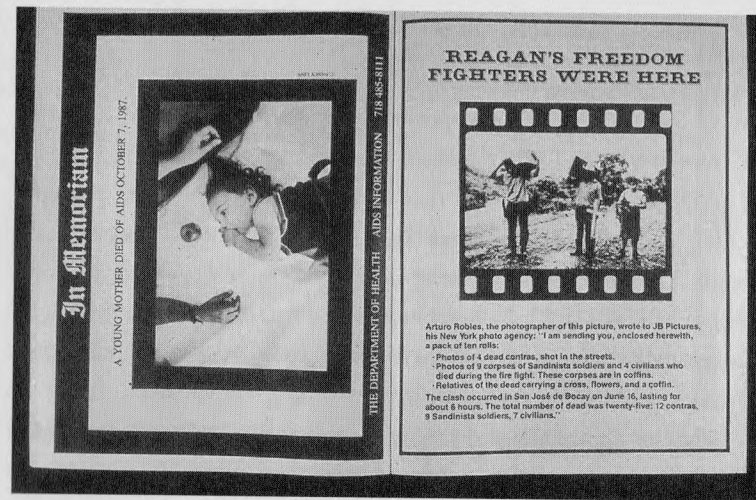
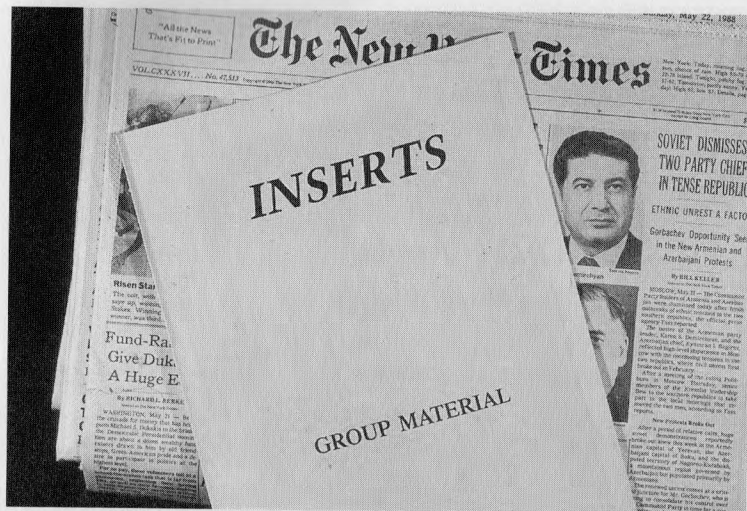
the nationally broadcast, prime-time animated show *The Simpsons*, and Gary Trudeau, author of the comic strip *Doonesbury*. Extending beyond the art world, in the early 1990s, Barbara Kruger began to enter the mass-market print media world in full force. She created visual op-ed pieces for the *New York Times*, covers for *Newsweek* and *Esquire* magazines, and a fashion project for *Harper's Bazaar*. It is particularly rare and history-making for a female artist to have attained this kind of opinion-forming, mass-distribution power.

But in the mid-1980s, access to the mass media for artists seemed harder to achieve, and in retrospect I think this difficulty informed some of the Left art world's nostalgia for and interest in the Weimar artists who did enjoy a media soapbox. In addition there was a generational parallel.

the generation who came of age in the 1920s in countries like the United States and Germany celebrated a new saturation of media in everyday culture—an explosion of radio, film, and photojournalism. Analogously, the generation born soon after World War II in Western industrialized countries was the first to grow up with television. For those baby boomers who eventually joined the population of the New York art world, the daily pleasures and sophistication of TV's high-quality production and its format, plot, and advertising appropriations paved the way for an enthusiastic reading of the 1920s and 1930s writings of German cultural critics Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, Siegfried Kracauer, and Ernst Bloch. They devoured these critics who dove into popular culture, enjoyed it, and simultaneously retrieved elements of it for its own critique, much more so than sour Adorno or straight-laced Lukács. The critique from within—brought up to date with the institution-based theories of Althusser and media-focused writings like Judith Williamson's of British cultural studies—spoke to eighties artists collectives in New York City. After all, these groups were large, low-budget, cottage-industry coalitions, so the discussions of the interface of individual analyses with mass culture, in particular mass media and other cultural institutions, appealed. For these art and propaganda groups, mass media was, and is, seen as the powerful teaching institution where small budgets could be most economically magnified in power—or at least dreams of this were fostered. The media and its accompanying design techniques had a particular draw for single-issue groups that attempted a tight focus in order to accomplish anything politically at all during the social-service-cutting Reagan years.

How was Group Material faring, though, in the 1980s, with its more scattershot approach, curating shows, expanding artistic access to disempowered people, postering subways, and so forth? This question raises the issue of how effectively, in different ways, different models of collectivism function in an unabashedly capitalist society. I would argue that, while the small-group, community focus of Group Material's early exhibitions served its members and immediate audiences, Group Material was most broadly effective, as are other U.S. collectives, when it intersected with cultural institutions already successfully embedded in the capitalist mar-





Group Material, *Inserts, The Sunday New York Times* (May 22 1988), detail Nancy Linn/Hans Haacke. (7.8a,b)

ketplace—which is all a long way of saying that to have a voice in capitalism, the institutions already existing and speaking loudly must be used. These are not necessarily—or usually—collectivist tools, but can be bent for that purpose. And in fact the real stories of negotiation and compromise may be not so much about discussions within the various political collectives where members, as argumentative as they might be, tended to be like-minded, but rather in the labyrinthian contracts made on a group basis with larger, powerful organizations.

Consider Group Material's collaborations with two powerful New York art institutions, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Dia Art Foundation, and the group's occasional infiltration of the mass media. In the 1985 Whitney Biennial where, like all Whitney Biennials, selection of the artists was highly disputed and status-conscious, Group Material snuck an additional forty-five artists representing a truly democratic mix of styles into their installation to create a crowded, quite popular Biennial-within-a-Biennial (fig. 7.7). For the Dia Art Foundation in 1988–89 Group Material organized a series of public “town meetings” (discussion forums) and exhibitions around democratic themes, particularly education, participation, and politics. These Whitney and Dia events served an art world public but spilled into the media as well with fairly comprehensive coverage. Group Material directly contributed to the media when, on May 22, 1988, it produced an insert in *The Sunday New York Times*, a twelve-page, paid-for supplement including works by ten invited artists known as media strategists such as Jenny Holzer, Carrie Mae Weems, and Hans Haacke (figs. 7.8a,b). Funded by the Public Art Fund, the New York State Council for the Arts, and Art Matters, *Inserts* was handled by the Times advertising department, and Group Material had to negotiate with the Advertising Acceptability Editor to get the content approved. The cost for 115,000 inserts (about one-tenth of the *Sunday Times* circulation) was approximately \$17,000. In an unprecedented marshaling of art magazines, Group Material, with Visual AIDS (a political group promoting AIDS awareness) published an AIDS timeline in 1990 in *Afterimage*, *Art & Auction*, *Art in America*, *Arts*, *October*, *Parkett*, and five other venues combining historical facts about the epidemic, artworks, reports on government actions and inactions, and safe sex



information. Individual editors were approached, and the magazines each donated the space involved.

The focus on the media, though, was more than an 1980s trend and continued with artists' organizations into the nineties, through George Bush's term (1988–92) and the more liberal Clinton era. A nineties example is the short-lived Barbie Liberation Organization (B.L.O. which worked with a kind of warped consumerism and media-savviness. It was a group that deftly exploited already flourishing shopping-mall culture.

The Barbie Liberation Organization, an East Village-based performance art group, whose members were anonymous, splashed into the media for a brief time around Christmas 1993. They had bought some three hundred Barbie and G.I. Joe dolls and surgically altered them by trading the masculine and feminine voice boxes. The retreaded Barbies said things like "Eat lead, Cobra!" and "Attack!" and the tampered G.I. Joes trilled "Let's go shopping!" and "Let's plan our dream wedding!" Then the B.L.O. placed the sabotaged dolls back on store shelves in a couple of different areas of the United States where they were bought by unsuspecting customers who received as well a pamphlet in every box decrying sexism and violence in the toy industry and asking people to call their local media. Media coverage across the country was astounding; the B.L.O. managed both to entertain and to plug into parents' anxiety about their children's consumer culture. As one answer to the question about how politically oriented collectives can function in a rambunctiously capitalist society, the B.L.O. managed to participate temporarily in institutions of retail consumerism and media entertainment, thereby getting out a message of reform.

Members of the B.L.O. needed to remain anonymous because they were engaged in illegal, if not criminal, activities—redesigning a product and putting it back on the shelves. The Guerrilla Girls also have feared retribution—but by peers and authorities in the arts who might seek to damage individual careers, not by the government—and their anonymity is a sadder index of how little power women artists actually do have in the art world. A Guerrilla Girl told Mira Schor: "Publishing our names would destroy our anonymity, and therefore both our effectivity and our

careers would be gone, dead." Ironically, the Guerrilla Girls use naming and shaming as a technique to pressure galleries and other organizations into showing and selling art by women and racial minorities, as in their 1985 poster *These galleries show no more than 10% women artists or none at all* fingering Leo Castelli, Marlborough, and others (fig. 7.9). Occasionally, Group Material's members will sign their names to statements, but much of their work and the products of other groups like Gran Fury and WAC are authored by the coalition's name and not those of individual artists.

As much as I respect each of these collectives, examining them, as well as having attended WAC meetings, has raised a general question for me: is anonymity sometimes counterproductive? Perhaps an eschewing of individualism can be inhibiting. When creative coalitions are composed of many people who already lack power and name recognition, many of whom have to work day jobs and do their own work at night in order to pay New York City's high rents, and are nonprofit to boot, they can foster a certain kind of bitterness, a feeling that there's a lot of work but little reward. On the one hand, in idealistic, purist structures where all decisions are made collectively, there is no hierarchy, and the lack of pandering to individual egos can seem a welcome rebellion, a break from our voraciously commodified society where authors/artists function as one more commodity. On the other hand, this relief can be temporary and is often replaced by exhaustion and infighting. Many people operate better with



Guerrilla Girls, *These galleries show no more than 10% women artists or none at all*, poster, 1985. This was one of "the posters that started it all. We plastered them on the walls of Soho in the middle of the night.



*Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, Washington, D.C., Oct. 10–11, 1992, photograph by Jonathan Weinberg. (7.10)*

the fuel of ego boosts. It is difficult, in a society where people are raised to expect consumerist rewards for working, to receive so little in terms of recognition or money, and at times the satisfaction of long-term teaching through the media can seem too distant. There can be a kind of puritanism to the anonymity that seems forced and joyless, repressing strong authorial emotions that go into the forming of political art collectives. People often enjoy identifying with their own anger, take pleasure in speaking out, and find satisfaction in influencing the media and/or legislation. My position, and personal experience, is that purist models of collectivism are not as effective in the United States as those that work with existing capitalist institutions, and that often include using some form of authorship. This pragmatic approach involves individual satisfaction as well as group effort: in general my bias is against anonymity.

In conclusion, let one strong example of the melding of deep emotion, name honoring, individual closure, and the continuity of coalition political beliefs—the AIDS quilt—stand as a model for a profoundly

effective kind of art and politics collectivism. Begun in 1987 by San Francisco-based gay activist Cleve Jones, the AIDS quilt (officially titled the Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt) is made up of three-by-six-foot panels, each commemorating the death of one person and signed by the creator of the panel (fig. 7.10). It is more than a mourning shroud. Funded by the Names Project Foundation, the quilt (or parts of it) tours the country making a powerful if implicit statement—interpreted by lobbyists and casual observers as well—about the need for government spending on medical research, reform of health insurance policies, and tightening of drug company regulation. Through the efforts of the quilt-makers, ACT UP, and other AIDS activist groups (along with the experience and voices of the many Americans who live without health insurance), it has now become common wisdom that health care in the United States is unfairly distributed. These collectives, artistic and otherwise, without a doubt contributed to the attempt of the Clinton administration during its first two years to make health reform a priority and to the continuing public awareness of health care and insurance problems. All the while, the AIDS quilt honors the individual lives that have been lost and appreciates the creativity, emotions, and collective action of those who remain alive.

**Note**

1 Mira Schor, "Girls Will Be Girls," *Artforum* (Sept. 1990): 124–129.