

the local and global challenges posed by social, economic and ecological imperatives. The underlying philosophy is to equip students with the necessary skills to face these challenges in the work environment and to be sensitive to society's needs in a sustainable way.

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Designing with the enemy: poster diplomacy via Seattle-Moscow-Tehran- Havana

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Abstract

Designing with the Enemy is an examination of a three-part curatorial project by Daniel R. Smith that has united the city of Seattle with the capitols of nations often at odds politically with the United States—namely Cuba, Iran and Russia. Focusing on the poster as cultural expression, this series of city-to-city exhibitions brought contemporary work of these disparate cities together through thoughtful exchanges shared with public at large.

Keywords

Social Activism, Responsibility, Cultural Diversity

Whose Enemy?

For a brief moment following the events of September 11, 2001, there was an outpouring of heartfelt, grassroots patriotism in my country, including my city of Seattle, famous as a liberal, left-wing corner of the U.S. In my city, Seattle, the remote, liberal capitol of the United States, there was a brief moment of heartfelt, grass roots patriotism for our country following the events of September 11, 2001. We felt for those who died and the rescuers who tried to save them. The world responded, too, with an outpouring of sympathy, sharing our grief and shock. It seemed this tragedy contained an opportunity to bring the world together through our common reaction and desire for global justice. Instead, our President embarked on a public relations campaign to whip-up support for his plan to attack Iraq, a country unconnected to the hijackings. We entered an era of excuses, misdirection and outright lies from the Bush administration about who was responsible and who deserved punishment. The result was to obscure the connections we felt and deepen divisions.

"Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists."

George W. Bush, September 20, 2001

During Bush's two terms in office, "the enemy" became anyone our president said it was. Blame was directed towards those he had family scores to settle with; who told the truth about manipulated intelligence; and who stood in opposition to war. New enemies and old adversaries were lumped together in the famous "Axis of Evil" speech. The administration seemed to have an endless supply of straw men—targets presented to deflect blame and focus public anger.

The face presented by the Bush administration was not representative of my country or my city in particular. Americans have a deep interest in peace and the world beyond our borders—an interest undermined by the fear-inducing tactics of our president who intentionally incited the worst in our citizenry to further his agenda. We entered a low-point in American diplomacy, the administration supplanting diplomacy with threats and military force, touting the idea that dialogue with our enemies is ineffective, a sign of weakness. Witnessing all this in Seattle, our feelings of patriotism quickly waned, even as much of the country, believing Bush's war-time rhetoric, elected him to a second term in 2004.

The Seattle-Havana Poster Show

In 2006 I traveled to Cuba through an exchange program established by the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA). For an American, any trip to Cuba is an act of political defiance. But I had stereotypical ideas about life there. While my image of vintage American cars crowding the roads was accurate, I had ideas about Cuban graphic design that were out dated. I pictured state-sponsored propaganda frozen in the 1960s or 1970s—a golden era of Cuban political silkscreen posters—extolling the revolution and its heroes. Propaganda exists in Cuba today, but it is created by anonymous designers with little attention to craft, focusing wholly on shock value. In stark contrast to this work stood the exciting output of young, urban designers of Havana.

In Havana, individuals and collaborative groups were creating silkscreen posters for events that were almost never distributed as true advertising—they were made purely for the love of design. They were creating posters for friends, for events, for their portfolios, for anyone who would pay attention. The content was deeply personal, individualistic, not—as I imagined from outside—dominated by some collective idea of design controlled by the state. This was a Cuban "Do-It-Yourself" aesthetic and initiative in action; a close parallel to the punk-inspired attitude that dominates rock concert poster production in Seattle.

I was inspired to do something for Seattle and Havana—to share our work publicly, open eyes to our common ideas symbolized by these posters. A collaborative project would foster a sense of connection between our two peoples and help undermine Bush's attempts to demonize Cuba. Given strong parallels between poster designs in Havana and Seattle, I chose to assemble a joint show. Fortunately I involved the right people from the start as co-curators, Jacob McMurray of Experience Music Project in Seattle, Pedro Contreras Suárez of el Centro de Desarrollo de las Artes Visuales (CDAV) and Pepe Menéndez at Casa de las Américas, and many extraordinary things fell into place. Bumbershoot, Seattle's largest music and arts festival, loved the idea and the show opened there in September 2007. Attendance was estimated at 8,000 – 9,000 people in four days. The reception was clearly enthusiastic—many people were as excited as I was to see connections in the work that humanized the other side of the political divide.

The Seattle-Havana Poster Show consisted of 40+ silkscreen posters. Most of the posters were exhibited as pairings—one from Seattle, one from Havana—hung together to accentuate their similarities. Similar form, content and color guided assembly—there was a pair of crowing roosters; clawing monsters, both real and abstract; and the frenetic energy of a buzz-saw matched by blood-spurting, gnawing rats. Additionally, four designers were selected to have their own mini-exhibits, also as contextual pairings. The godfather of Seattle concert posters, Art Chantry was across from one of Cuba's most famous designers, Eduardo Muñoz Bachs. One of Seattle's most notorious young innovators, Devon Varmega, showed his illegible concert posters across from the illustration-driven works of the young, surreal, Havana collective Grupo Camaleón. In its Seattle premiere, a surprising number of visitors had difficulty distinguishing the American posters from the Cuban, despite the fact that one side was in English and the other in Spanish. At first glance, the work seemed to come from the same space, the same heart.

Soon after the Seattle premiere, CDAV's Contreras received permission for the exhibit to open in his renovated museum in old Havana. April 2008 saw the opening of the first city-to-city exhibit from the U.S. hosted by a major art institution in post-revolutionary Cuba. The exhibits required a year and a half of planning, three trips to Cuba for myself, hand delivery of all the posters, and overcoming unforeseen issues of Cuban life—like CDAV's last minute request to borrow a box of ordinary binder clips from another museum because they lacked the funds to purchase them. Nine U.S. designers in attendance hand carried 400 full-color exhibit catalogs from Seattle to distribute free at the opening. At the end of the exhibit, all Seattle posters were donated to CDAV for their permanent collection. Through this process, we demonstrated that despite travel

restrictions, despite the U.S. embargo and an administration hostile to cooperation and exchange, we could act courageously, in the spirit of friendship, to produce something of lasting inspiration.

The Seattle-Tehran Poster Show

Organizing the exhibits between Seattle and Havana was a significant challenge, but I wondered if the idea could be extended to other countries. Could the project be made even more relevant in terms of U.S. politics and more extreme in the divide it attempted to bridge? I considered the Islamic Republic of Iran. I had no idea if a U.S. citizen could go there, but after a cursory internet search of “Tehran” and “graphic design” I knew I had found my next destination.

The city of Tehran is exploding with talented graphic designers producing beautiful, experimental work. A U.S.-based peace organization, the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), coordinates frequent visits of Americans interested in citizen-to-citizen diplomacy to Iran. FOR encourages participants to research Persian politics, culture and history in advance of their trip and, upon return to the U.S., actively engage their home communities by sharing their experiences. This fit perfectly with the intention of my exhibit, so with the travel arranged, the only obstacle to overcome was internalized fear. At the time, the Bush administration was playing up American fears of Iran, accusing it of supplying explosives to anti-American insurgents in Iraq and stoking fears of Iran’s potential nuclear threat. Proof to back these accusations was thin, but given how the administration manipulated its way into war with Iraq, there was little doubt that the anti-Iran rhetoric was a possible lead-up to war.

In anticipation of the trip, I tried to conjure up an image of Iran, but I found myself unable to picture the city of Tehran or its citizens. Small wonder—the images Americans hold of Iran were formulated in 1979 with the Islamic Revolution and reinforced ever since by politicians and media who present a sadly incomplete portrait. Our media recycle vintage footage of the 1979 hostage crisis at the U.S. embassy in Tehran, or show us Iran’s president Ahmadinejad giving fiery speeches, but never current images of downtown Tehran, or interviews with average Iranians. Imagine my surprise when I arrived in Tehran and found a bustling, European-style capitol of people friendly towards America and Americans. Strangers in the street, curious about this foreigner, often could not contain their excitement at meeting an American. The effect was surreal—at home Bush was insisting “all options are on the table” in dealing with Iran, including nuclear strikes—while in Tehran strangers asked, please, can they have a photo taken with me.

Despite limitations on my activities in Tehran, I was able to meet with several talented designers, the greatest response

being from a loose association of young designers, recent graduates of Tehran University. Born in 1979 or later, they grew up knowing only post-revolutionary Iran. Their generation has struggled to create a new graphic identity. “Graphic design” itself is an idea imported from the west. Its jargon has no clear equivalent in Farsi, so English words such as “posters” and “typography” have become the standard in their industry.

Persian typography, once seen internally as an inhibitor to Iranian design, has become their cutting-edge area of exploration. Under the guidance of famed Tehran University professor Reza Abedini, they have found something “ownable.” The flexibility of this new Persian typography is fascinating—Farsi script is more than simple type in their hands, it is raw material. In their work, the word is image, the image is fluid, and Roman characters seem rigid, absolutely static in comparison. While representations of humans and animals are not banned in Iran, as in some neighboring countries, the number of purely typographic posters produced speaks to concern in this area. Also, while no formal body exists to censor their work, the internal political situation is difficult to navigate. As a designer with almost 30 years of experience in post-revolution Tehran, Abedini states “One develops a sense of what is acceptable” to the theocracy in terms of subject matter and imagery. All of this, on the surface, would seem to set the world of Iranian graphic design distinctly apart from the wide-open genre of rock posters in Seattle.

To produce a second exhibit, matching suitable, relevant posters from my socially liberal outpost of the U.S. with the capitol of the Islamic Republic of Iran might seem an improbable task. Fortunately, I befriended a talented young designer Iman Raad in Tehran, who became co-curator of The Seattle-Tehran Poster Show. Raad collected the Iranian half of the exhibit, while I simultaneously assembled the Seattle posters. I had a sense of the work that might mesh with the Persian posters, but I worked blindly until the Iranian half of the exhibit arrived in Seattle.

The process of matching up posters from Tehran and Seattle was magic. The combinations were surprising, accidental, and beautifully suggestive. I had gathered posters that skewed toward the more ornate and focused on typography than those in the Cuban show, in hopes that they would combine well with those from Iran. A pair like Raad’s “The Birth of Typography, Lecture by Reza Abedini” and Craig Updegrove’s “The Blood Brothers” reveals an underground connection between ancient Farsi script and hand-drawn, American punk. The shocking visual similarities between Justin Hampton’s concert poster “Earl Greyhound” and Homa Delvrai’s “Hafez” are amplified by the fact that young Iranians gather at the ancient Persian poet’s tomb much as Americans seek out Jimi Hendrix’s

grave in Seattle or Jim Morrison's grave in Paris. Exhibit feature walls included work by Professor Abedini across from Robynne Raye, Cornish College professor in Seattle, and the male duo Ames Bros (Barry Ament and Coby Schultz) across from the Iranian, female, design duo of Soha Shirvani and Reyhaneh Sheikhabaei.

The Seattle-Tehran Poster Show premiered at Seattle's Bumbershoot, in August 2008. The reception was even larger than for the Havana exhibit the year previous, with an estimated audience of 10,000 people in 4 days. The amount of local and national media coverage generated, and the excitement expressed by Seattleites upon seeing the work from Tehran, revealed a deep desire of my country's citizens to know more about this "enemy." This first exhibition of contemporary Iranian posters anywhere in the U.S. put a human face on a country our government was aggressively demonizing. In a small, but potent way the exhibit worked to counteract the rhetoric of the Bush administration at a critical time.

The Seattle-Tehran Poster Show has not exhibited in Iran. Sadly, the political climate has worsened for Iranians who maintain close contacts with Americans. My co-curator has suggested waiting to attempt the exhibit after Iranian presidential elections in June, 2009.

The Seattle-Moscow Poster Show

Given the success and the momentum of the exhibits in Seattle, I picked one more destination to end the series as a triptych. I chose Moscow for our historic political divide that once seemed unbridgeable. Cold war fears of the Soviets that permeated the U.S. still color American perceptions of Russia. In the recent past, tensions rose briefly during their invasion of Georgia and in the U.S. presidential campaign, the Republican party recalled old images of Russia and its dictators to bolster the thin foreign policy credentials of Alaska governor Sarah Palin (humorously with Palin claiming "...when you consider even national security issues with Russia as Putin rears his head and comes into the airspace of the United States of America, where — where do they go? It's Alaska.") Current political tensions between the U.S. and Russia are nothing compared to historic levels, but the idea of working with a city that, until recently, was very difficult for Americans to visit, seemed an appropriate way to finish the series.

The Seattle-Moscow exhibit was simpler to coordinate and more open in terms of content than Havana or Tehran. But I expected some aspect of Soviet rule to effect the work of Russian designers—perhaps an unwillingness to criticize the Soviet era because it was so oppressive. The designers I met are instead indifferent to Soviet imagery. New York 1980s graffiti holds more power with the current

generation of Russian designers than an image of Lenin, an image that today is pure kitsch, absent the emotional and political power one would expect of an image of Castro in Havana, even 20 years from now. In fact, Seattle designers seem more entranced by the power of Soviet-era graphics, returning the favor of cross-cultural fascination; see for example the Ames Brother's posters for the band Linkin Park and Pearl Jam.

Given the relaxation on both sides, The Seattle-Moscow Poster Show (opened September 2, 2009, Bumbershoot, Seattle) differs from its predecessors. Instead of avoiding political content, the exhibit explores our shared political history. One example is Anna Naumova and Igor Gurovich's poster for the Sergei Kuryokhin International Festival in 2002. Executed shortly after 9/11, the poster for an experimental Moscow music festival presents a typographic silhouette of the twin World Trade Center towers in New York with a crudely drawn airplane hitting the first tower. The image was shocking to me when I discovered it. It seemed odd that a Russian designer would employ the image as advertising for anything. As an American, I realized I felt a sense of ownership over this image. Naumova's explanation of her intent reflected the ideals that motivated the exhibit series. "This tragedy was not an American tragedy. This was a tragedy for the whole world." Seen in that light, the poster is an artistic expression of grief, an expression of compassion for those on the other side of the political divide. The real tragedy is that the world suffered through a U.S. administration unsophisticated enough to see the potential for unity in the aftermath of 9/11 or to express compassion, in the way these designers have, for those some would call "the enemy."