

ART, CULTURE, POLITICS:

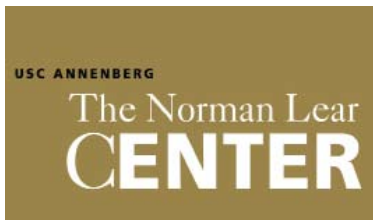


A CONVERSATION WITH SHEPARD FAIREY

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An edited transcript of a Visions & Voices event
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PARTICIPANTS



Sarah Banet-Weiser is an Associate Professor in the School of Communication at USC Annenberg and the department of American Studies and Ethnicity. Her teaching and research interests include feminist theory, race and the media, youth culture, popular and consumer culture, and citizenship and national identity. She teaches courses in culture and communication, gender and media, youth culture, feminist theory

and cultural studies.

Her first book, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (University of California Press, 1999), explores a popular cultural ritual, the beauty pageant, as a space in which national identities, desires, and anxieties about race and gender are played out. She has also authored a book on consumer citizenship and the children's cable network: *Kids Rule! Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship* (Duke University Press, 2007), in addition to her co-edited book, *Cable Visions: Television Beyond Broadcasting*, co-edited with Cynthia Chris and Anthony Freitas (New York University Press, 2007). Her current book project, *Authentic TM: Political Possibility in a Brand Culture* (New York University Press, forthcoming) examines brand culture, youth, and political possibility through an investigation of self-branding, creativity, politics, and religion. A co-edited book, *Commodity Activism: Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times*, co-edited with Roopali Mukherjee, is under contract with New York University Press (forthcoming 2011). She has published articles in the academic journals *Critical Studies* and *Media Communication*, *Feminist Theory*, the *International Journal of Communication*, and *Television and New Media*, among others.

She co-edits, with Kent Ono, a book series with New York University Press, "Critical Cultural Communication," and is the editor of *American Quarterly*.



Shepard Fairey shot to national fame as the graphic artist behind a 2008 iconic poster of Barack Obama, a portrait labeled simply "HOPE" and in a style that could be described as Andy Warhol meets Socialist Realism. Fairey, who graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1992, was already well known among graffiti artists and fans, thanks to one of Fairey's early works of "guerilla" art, an impromptu stencil design based on an ad

for Andre the Giant, a professional wrestler. Fairey made stickers of the image in the late '80s, along with the scrawl "Andre the Giant has a posse," and the image went viral, spreading far and wide through urban America, on street signs, billboards and walls. He later adapted the image and added the word "obey." Mixing left-wing politics with "appropriated" images and bold graphic design, Fairey now works as a fine artist and advertising designer, with a gallery in Los Angeles and business ventures that dip into publishing, fashion and urban sports (skateboarding).

Supporters call what he does appropriation art, but detractors call it plagiarism, and Fairey's success has put him in the middle of a legal and artistic debate about who owns what when it comes to images in the public. With permission from the staff of Obama's presidential campaign, Fairey began distributing the "HOPE" image in January of 2008. A year later, with Obama in the White House, Fairey's poster was officially displayed in the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. Around the same time the Associated Press declared Shepard's poster was based on a 2006 photo taken by the AP's Manny Garcia and they should get credit and compensation. Fairey filed a pre-emptive lawsuit against the AP, arguing he didn't owe them. Fairey has appeared in the documentary films *Andre the Giant Has a Posse* (by Helen Stickler, first distributed in 1997) and *Bomb It!* (2007), and his work has been documented in the book *Supply and Demand*.

Biography courtesy of:

<http://www.infoplease.com/biography/var/shepardfairey.html>

Art, Culture, Politics: A Conversation with Shepard Fairey



Sarah Banet-Weiser: Welcome to this Vision and Voices event – Art, Culture and Politics: A Conversation with Shepard Fairey. My name is Sarah Banet-Weiser. I’m an associate professor here at Annenberg as well as in American Studies in Ethnicity. I’ve organized this event as part of Visions & Voices in the USC Arts & Humanities initiative. I’d like to thank them for their support and bringing Shepard out here tonight.

It is my great pleasure to have with us tonight the internationally renowned artist, graphic designer and political activist, Shepard Fairey. Shepard Fairey’s artwork and iconic images, like his *Obey* street art, the *Obama Hope* poster and his recent poster art on clean energy, can be seen all around us – on street signs, walls in urban spaces and in the National Portrait Gallery. Earlier this year, I was in Boston and Shepard Fairey street art was everywhere. The streetlight in Harvard Square had an Andre the Giant sticker. I could see Fairey-designed posters featuring Angela Davis. The Institute for Contemporary Art in Boston was holding a retrospective of Shepard Fairey’s work at that time.

And the Boston scene is not unique. Shepard Fairey’s presence is felt all over the world – in London, in New York, in Paris and here in Los Angeles. The range of Shepard Fairey’s work means that he’s hardly a typical street graffiti artist working against the corporate establishment of advertising and its colonization of the street. Rather, his work challenges us to figure out its meaning. It refuses to sit still. It disrupts traditional boundaries between art, politics and consumer culture.

Emerging from the skateboarding scene in the mid-1990s, Shepard Fairey achieved

an early cult status with his Andre the Giant Has a Posse sticker campaign. It featured wrestler Andre the Giant, underscored with the word “obey,” as a way to both mock and critique the ubiquity of advertising. Through his Studio Number One he produces not only political posters, such as the now celebrated, Hope, Progress and Change posters for the Obama campaign, but also other political art, as well as a line of hip, skater-inspired clothing under the label Obey Giant, sold with the slogan, “Manufacturing Dissent Since 1989.” He was hired to help the struggling Saks Fifth Avenue department store and created a campaign that deployed constructionist-style graphics to entreat shoppers to want it. His current endeavors also include rebranding George Orwell’s Animal Farm with a new illustrated cover and, most recently, a collaboration with Levi’s.



I see Shepard Fairey as emblematic of a new cultural producer and artist, at home with entrepreneurship, creativity and progressive cultural politics simultaneously.

-Sarah Banet-Weiser

Clearly there is no one way to describe Shepard Fairey’s art. I see Shepard Fairey as emblematic of a new cultural producer and artist, at home with entrepreneurship, creativity and progressive cultural politics simultaneously. Because of this, his art refuses to be neatly categorized. The manifesto for his company, Obey, states that his art is informed by phenomenology, intended, in his words, “to reawaken a sense of wonder about one’s environment.” This commitment to wonder, to question and critique, his play with art and commerce and his recoding of the language of capitalist critique into campaigns that are playfully, yet directly, about the problems of consumerism, are key characteristics of Fairey’s unique art. It encourages individuals to create, experience, resist and challenge identities, through and within the visual and political culture of the current marketplace.

So with that, I’d like to talk to him about this. Please join me in welcoming Shepard Fairey.

This is an *Inside the Actors Studio* thing. We’ll save time for Q&A at the end of this conversation. What I’d like to do is ask Shepard some questions and have him talk about his life, his work, his politics and everything else. To start off, everyone has an “origin story.” You have one that’s repeated in many different ways in the press, so maybe you could share


that with us.



Shepard Fairey: Yeah. I guess everyone's probably looked at this slide; it's been up for 20 minutes. I love the Andre the Giant story, just because it's so random. A little bit of my background: I grew up in South Carolina. There's not a lot of progressive culture there. I got into skateboarding and punk rock when I was 14 and it was life changing. Bands from the Sex Pistols, The Clash, The Dead Kennedys, they opened my eyes to some cultural and political and social critique. They got me interested in how art could work with things that were political.

I decided I would like to go art school. I applied to the Rhode Island School of Design. And the summer after my freshman year at, we'll call it RISD for short, I was working at a skate shop and I was making homemade tee shirts because I had gotten into making my own handmade tee shirts. I had a friend over who wanted to learn how to make a stencil, because that's how I was making my shirts. And I looked through the newspaper and found a picture of Andre the Giant – this picture – and said, "Why don't you make a stencil of this?" And he said, "No way. That's stupid. I'm not making that." The shop was called The Water Shed. All the people who hung out at The Water Shed, we called ourselves Team Shed. And I said, "What are you talking about, man? Team Shed is so played out. Andre's Posse is going to be the new thing." And it was very, very spontaneous, but he was like, "Really? Yeah, like, what's this Andre Posse thing about?" And I said, you know, "We won't tell anybody what it is. We'll make some stickers and we'll give them to some people and say, "Here's the deal. You can't tell anybody what this is." It was a very spontaneous joke.

I made some stickers, gave them to the friends, put them on some stop signs. And the next thing you know, the local free paper, Providence, Rhode Island's equivalent of the *LA Weekly*, ran an article saying, "What's the Andre the Giant sticker campaign all about? Anyone that knows wins tickets to the show of their choice," at this one punk rock venue.



I had made maybe 500 stickers at that point, maybe 1,000 stickers. But to see that something started spontaneously as an inside joke with some skateboarder friends had actually generated a reaction from a media outlet. Then, the circulation of that paper was 15,000, so they'd amplified the number of impressions many, many times over. It started me thinking about images in public space, and how people are ... used to seeing advertising. But when there's something other than advertising that's popping up, that's hard to explain. They want to know. They want to get to the bottom of it. Some of the different interpretations I was hearing I considered to be like a Rorschach test. They reflected the personality and the sensibilities of the viewer. I was very fascinated by that.

So this happy accident ended up becoming an obsession for me. I thought that the more stickers that are out there, the more important it seems. The more important it seems, the more people want to know and you've built something from nothing and I get to just watch this process unfold. Of course, I thought that process was going to take about three months, not 20 years, but anyway.

Sarah Banet-Weiser: When was the moment you connected the sticker campaign with "Obey"?

Shepard Fairy: That was much later. At first I thought this was such a spontaneous creation, I couldn't deviate from it or else it would lose its magic charm. I did not understand the exact formula. I was very insecure – I still am, by the way.

John Carpenter's *They Live* (1988)

Sarah Banet-Weiser: Who isn't?

Shepard Fairy: I was very intrigued by the process of image repetition. I started to do a little bit of reading. I was a huge fan of The Sex Pistols already and had read a little bit about their interest in "situationism," the idea that people have become numb through repetition and they need unexpected spectacles to give them a new perspective. I also read about Martin Heidegger's theory of phenomenology, which is I think similar in concept: that there are things that are unique, that can reawaken a sense of wonder about one's environment. I felt that my sticker was achieving that, even though it didn't have any lofty ambitions originally.

Over time I thought, "Well, all right. Andre the Giant." I don't care about wrestling. This was just an inside joke. I need to figure out a way to evolve something, that though it started off silly, I actually think has some more profound implications. First I got crazy printing a lot of stickers, thousands of them.

Then I saw a film called *They Live*. This is a still from that film. Has anyone seen that film? Okay, so we have a few B or C movie fans in the house. It's a film that I thought was a great analog to my project. It was a very silly film but it raised some fairly profound issues. The premise of the film is Rowdy Roddy Piper – also, coincidentally, a wrestler – who's the protagonist. He's out of work and stumbles on this benevolent homeless camp, a reintegration into society camp. And the leader is a guy who looks like Ray Charles, with these sunglasses on. Then all of a sudden the riot cops come and tear the place down unexpectedly. And he thinks: Why? It's such a good, benevolent organization. Why would the powers-that-be want to destroy it?

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”
-Shepard Fairey

Then he sifts through the wreckage and he finds these sunglasses. He puts on the sunglasses and realizes when he looks at ads that they don't say, “vacation in the Bahamas,” they say “Consume. Sleep. Watch Television. Obey.” He looks at someone paying for something with money and it says, “This is your God,” on it. Do you see a thread here, like all these things end up showing back up in my work? The “this is your God” motif.

But the one that really stuck out to me was, “obey,” the idea that people ... follow the path of least resistance in life. They're obedient just not to rock the boat. But when they're confronted with the direct command to obey, it's very unsettling. And people usually react very poorly to that command. People who benefit from making an audience obedient, they package the command to obey in a much more lovely presentation than the direct command to obey.

So my thought was, “If I put ‘obey’ with this? People are going to want to know what it is.” Getting people to question, having to confront and question obedience I thought was a very important step. Because a lot of what I felt was problematic politically had to do with people being apathetic or complacent because they don't feel like there's enough at stake. But when they feel that someone's trying to control them, I think it definitely inspires action, frequently.



Sarah Banet-Weiser: There's a direction here – from a campaign that starts off silly and a happy accident to a more overtly political art. When you were first thinking about being an artist, did you always think that you wanted to do something that had to do with politics? And, specifically, a lot of your work takes aim at consumer culture in a really playful way.



Shepard Fairey: When I was younger and living in South Carolina, I thought that you had to make art of a seascape. And my dad said, “If you ... make it, you’ll get to do the South Carolina duck stamp.” And so...

Sarah Banet-Weiser: So you’re still trying for that, yeah.

Shepard Fairey: Yeah. And by the way, my dad was captain of the football team. My mom was head cheerleader. So we were a very traditional family. But really, it was a USC professor – I don’t know if he still teaches here – Robbie Conal. While I was going to an art boarding school in Idyllwild, California on the way – up in the mountains towards Indio – we came into L.A. to go to an art fair. It was during Iran Contragate. There were posters of Ronald Reagan painted very unflatteringly, with the words “Contra” above and “diction” below. And everyone knew that Reagan was lying about funding the Contras by selling arms to Iran, and Oliver North took the fall and all that. And I thought: This is a great piece of art. It’s got humor and politics all in one. It’s the formula I want to do. So Robbie Conal was a really big inspiration for me.

There’s a woman named Barbara Kruger whose work I like a lot. And my *Obey* in white type out of a red bar is a total Barbara Kruger knockoff. I think she teaches at UCLA. Sorry. I was going to make a joke when I got in here, like, “Hey, all right, UCLA. How’re you guys doing?” But I just thought if I wanted to live...

Sarah Banet-Weiser: It’s a very serious thing, you know, yeah.

Shepard Fairey: I know. But anyway, I thought about it then but I still wasn’t



sure how to do it in my own work. And when I was a freshman and sophomore at RSDI, I was making some pieces about the First Amendment, because some people had been arrested for burning the flag and I was doing some “question authority” and some “stop racism” pieces. But I actually felt like the formulas I was using were like, oh, cute little idealist, you know. It wasn’t going to affect anyone at all. My parents said, “Well, it’s great that you have this spark and this optimism, you know. You’ll learn that things don’t work that way.”

Sarah Banet-Weiser: And then you’ll make the duck stamp.

Shepard Fairey: Right. Yeah. So I always had the urge to make political commentary, but I think in the way I was doing it then it was a little bit trite. And maybe plenty of it still is. But when I got into the Andre thing I thought that it needed a little bit of mystery. If the audience needs to wrestle with the meaning a little bit, it might be more powerful than a didactic message. I’ve tried to maintain an element of that. But after Bush was elected, I definitely thought: Well, maybe there’s a little bit of room to be didactic, because the subtle approach is not working, obviously.

Anyway, yeah, it was the beginning of college. I felt like I wanted those things to converge, but it took a little while for it to gel.

Sarah Banet-Weiser: And so you moved to Che.

Shepard Fairey: Well, the joke here with this Che piece – some people are very offended by me desecrating something that they consider a Latino icon. I have ambivalent feelings about Che. But the actual reason I did this piece was because Che had become such a hollow symbol of rebellion that most of the people wearing the shirt did not even necessarily know much about Che’s life. And Rage Against the Machine, who I think are great, great politicians, they made a shirt. And all of a sudden it’s just cool to have a Che shirt. By

hijacking it I was just making fun of how hollow it is. If you didn't think Andre was rebellious, well, now you think he's rebellious.



It brings up an interesting story about how people process images. The previous slide – this image here – the first incarnation of it was just that skuzzy face cropped like this, with the “obey” beneath it. I made some posters and some shirts of that. And my version of Che is just that same face, but with a little bit of the Che mustache incorporated into it.

I had an art show in San Diego where I did a painting of this, with the red background and everything. It was hanging in the window of the gallery, which happened to be right across from the Department of Water and Power. And when I moved into a new house and I needed to switch some of the water and power stuff over, I just walked into the office to deal with it. I was wearing a shirt of the Obey with the skuzzy face, like that face. And I walked in and there was a young man behind the counter and he looked at my shirt and he goes, “I love your shirt of Che Guevara.”



Graphics and a lot of stuff can be used as propaganda tools to manipulate. The portion of my image of Che that he remembered was the Andre face, but he identified it as Che because of the beret and the red background and the star. But I actually changed his memory of what Che looked like by tweaking it. That's what happens a lot of times with how lobbyists spin messages, advertisers spin messages. A lot of the work that I've done, people think that it's just being irreverent towards symbols that they hold sacred. But it's actually trying to demonstrate how this process of manipulation works.

Sarah Banet-Weiser: That's an interesting story about both your own art work

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-Shepard Fairey



and how iconic it is, right? So this kid recognizes it. There's this ongoing memory that keeps getting told and retold about Che. Right? Do you want your work to have a particular or specific political impact? Or do you think of it more broadly, as in, "I want people just to question the world around them"?

Shepard Fairey: It's both. I have some pieces that are designed to provoke people to question things. And then I have other designs that have a very specific agenda. We'll get to some of that stuff. But the *Hope* and *Progress* images for Obama were absolutely sincere. No irony. People call it propaganda, but propaganda has a sinister connotation. Yes, it was propaganda, but everything is propaganda. When you watch MSNBC and then you watch Fox and you see the two ends of the spectrum. They're both supposed to be reporting the news. There's an agenda there. There's propaganda. There's so much propaganda out there.

Sometimes I'm just trying to get people to question everything they're inundated with. Other times, in the case of *Obama* or my *Clean Energy* stuff or some of my other political anti-Bush stuff, I'm saying I think this has merit or we should be worried about this. I like being able to have a range in my work, where I'm absolutely committed to a specific point of view with certain things. And with other things I'm asking the viewer to wrestle with it internally.

Sarah Banet-Weiser: Speaking of wrestling internally, your artwork is squarely situated within consumer culture. Some of it challenges it; some of it critiques it; some of it mocks it; some of it is part of it, your Obey clothing brand.

Shepard Fairey: Right.

Sarah Banet-Weiser: How do you understand the relationship between politics and consumerism? There's this ongoing story out there that you can either be political or you can be a consumer, but the two never should meet.



“If you accept capitalism as the economic system and you don't want to just completely overthrow capitalism, then you have to find your way within capitalism to achieve the things you want to achieve.”

-Shepard Fairey

Shepard Fairey: I understand why people feel that way because any time there's a financial agenda, it should be very closely analyzed for ethics. When you look at why the healthcare reform is being held up, it's the medical insurance companies, the drug companies. There are a lot of people who have a financial interest in it not happening. So I can understand that. But at the same time, I'm about to do a project with Converse for their Red program, where proceeds from the product go to AIDS in Africa prevention.

If you accept capitalism as the economic system and you don't want to just completely overthrow capitalism, then you have to find your way within capitalism to achieve the things you want to achieve. That's why I make work, much of which questions aspects of capitalism. But it's the system that we're in. Am I going to try to achieve what I want within it and use what I think is not ethically problematic about capitalism to help facilitate the things I care about? Of course I am. That makes sense to me.

People dismiss that idea. The sad thing is that their pessimism has kept them from even trying, frequently. They feel that they will be, for lack of a better term, slaves to the system, that they will work for someone, that they will not have enough control over their own lives. They feel like victims. I approach what I do as: this is the system, and I'm not going to be a victim, but I'm also not going to victimize others. I'm going to do what I can to have my ethics align with my participation in capitalism.

Sarah Banet-Weiser: Right. I see that connection. What about the use of public space? We were talking earlier about how this is a part of your expression of your First Amendment rights. Talk about the use of public space, freedom of speech, and how that's then connected to this critique of capitalism. How does that work?



Shepard Fairey: We're all taxpayers or will be at some point. Therefore, public space, a little sliver of it is owned by everyone. But this space is controlled only by people with a financial agenda. They're the ones who spend the money on advertising. They can then put whatever they want in public space, yet someone who has some other form of expression but is not going to generate the money for it doesn't have the right to use the space. That seems like a very ridiculous idea.

I do respect private property. And some of these pieces are on private property, but as you can see, not well kept. So what I try to do as an artist is definitely call into question the control of public space. A blank billboard, city walls that are already full of graffiti or a little scuzzed up, I think that's a legitimate space for my expression. I'd never want to inconvenience anyone with the work that I put up. But, especially before the Internet, this was one of the only ways that someone who wanted a platform to communicate publicly could find for themselves.

I still think that in some ways it is more inspiring than the Internet. It's very easy to get on the Internet and blog or post comments, but does it inspire the same reaction from the audience that the person who had the passion to take it literally to the streets? There's something to be said for that. I might be one of those old people who's like, "Back before the Internet you had to do this, and it was so hard core."

But I'm an adrenalin junkie. I love the thrill of putting stuff up. And I've paid the price; I've been arrested many times. I think that the idea that there's room for more than just advertising in public space is a very important concept.

So, yeah, here's some of my stuff. It's a bit juvenile, but being juvenile can be cathartic when you are incredibly depressed about what's going on. I was looking more for a chuckle from



my other peers that were just as aghast at the situation. You know, the *Obama* image was about: let's change the future rather than complaining about what's going on right now.

Sarah Banet-Weiser: Did you worry that people who were familiar with the Bush stuff would then situate the *Obama Hope* alongside of it as a kind of irony? Was that a concern when you were making this?

Shepard Fairey: My biggest concern was that we not have another Republican president. So everything else fell to the wayside. My wife was about to have our second daughter and I didn't want another Republican in office. I felt like the country was on a bad track. The Patriot Act, shrinking privacy, care for human rights, torture, so many different things. I felt like I could deviate from what people's expectations would be for my rebel brand or whatever. And, "Hey, this isn't ironic. What's your problem, man?" I felt like I could live with that.

And there's been plenty of backlash. But dialogue with the public is always very valuable and important. Anybody who makes reasonable art, whether it's music or writing or visual art, is going to benefit from worrying about what the public's reaction is going to be. The moment you start second-guessing your real feelings and your instincts, you falter.

Sarah Banet-Weiser: Earlier when I said your work refuses categorization, that's what I was thinking. The *Obama Hope* poster was so earnest and it did resonate. Even a year later, it resonated in a way that was uniquely powerful. For those of us who also didn't want another Republican or wanted Obama in office, it was





powerful. So it seems to me that it was very far from ironic hipster. And with some of your stuff – hipsters really like your stuff. Sorry. It was interesting to see the range here and how it refuses to be pinned down.

Shepard Fairey: Thanks. It's important for me to do what strikes me at the moment. I'm actually feeling – disappointed with Obama is the right way to put it. I think he could be a lot more assertive about certain things. I'm bummed that Guantanamo hasn't been resolved. There's tons of things. But I'm just as disappointed in us. I'm disappointed that we're not pushing for the right things hard enough and that idiots are controlling the conversation. Glenn Beck has a strong following. That makes me want to kill myself.

Sarah Banet-Weiser: Yeah, I'm with you, I'm with you.

Shepard Fairey: But then that would be one less person to push back against that fucker, so...

Sarah Banet-Weiser: Yeah. Don't do that. Yeah, yeah.

Shepard Fairey: Anyway...

Sarah Banet-Weiser: Well, I like the *Rolling Stone* cover, right? Because that was like a take two on the *Obama Hope*.

Shepard Fairey: I did the illustration and wrote the copy for the article. And it's him standing in front of the presidential seal. It's an image that *Rolling Stone* licensed from the AP for \$350 for me to then do an illustration from. And I changed the type in the presidential seal, but used the same type style, so you recognize it as a reference to the



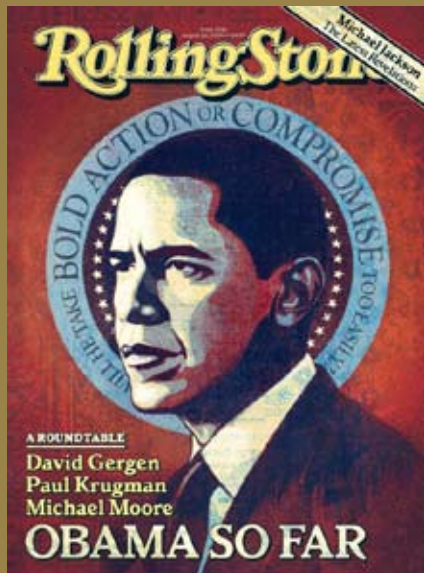
seal, to say, “Will he take bold action or compromise too easily?” And still, all the right-wing blogs said, “He put a halo behind Obama because he thinks he’s the Messiah.” I’m like, “Actually, he was standing in front of the presidential seal.” And the type isn’t all that messianic.

Anyway, the idea behind the image is that Obama looks very concerned. He looks like he has a lot of stress and responsibility. Rather than it being this Obama on a pedestal, it was Obama under duress. But I talked with the editor about the cover. I said, “What I think the type should say is, will we take bold action, or will we compromise too easily? Because Obama’s just the foot in the door. That’s what I think anyway.

I was against the war in Iraq and I still am, and not too psyched on Afghanistan either. But I’ve made a lot of pro-peace stuff since 2003.

Sarah Banet-Weiser: Okay. So let’s get into the capitalism stuff. I had read that the *Rolling Stone* piece was in the style of the dollar bill. Obama gracing the dollar bill. Do you see this work continuing? I liked what you had said earlier about pushing up against the problems of capitalism without saying, “let’s overthrow it.”

Shepard Fairey: Yeah. I definitely think that work is going to be made again in the future. This series is called *Two Sides of Capitalism*. This is the good side. It’s sort of partially autobiographical. I started out of college at a small printing company and I figured if I want my voice out there, I would have to print my own stuff. So this piece is saying, “Freedom of the press is guaranteed to those who own one.” And the AP uses that; they write their own stories about stuff for their own agenda. But I print my own stuff that has to do with my own agenda.



And capitalism, if you work hard and you're resourceful you can create a life for yourself. And now I have a design firm. I hire my friends. We have a gallery that's funded basically by the profits of the design firm, because the gallery makes no money. This is, to me, the utopian side of capitalism. Of course, Uncle Sam then comes and takes a bunch of our money and spends it on wars that I don't want and stuff like that. You've got to pay this. So there are aspects of capitalism that are no fun. But there are things that I see as positive about it.

And I printed money of this stuff, by the way, two sides of the bill. This side looks like a real dollar, I would fold it up on that side and crumple it and leave it places. People would come and pick it up. But it's actually a sad story. This piece was an 11 x 16-foot piece. I did it in Brooklyn, New York. It was for a show that I did called *E Pluribus Venom*. It was in a huge space with glass windows. And we were walking around Brooklyn and usually I don't litter. I don't think it's a good thing. But I was dropping these dollars around. And a homeless lady walked into the gallery the last day before the opening and said like, "That's what that is. I've been picking up those dollars." But we had some food and drink there for her. So we hooked her up.

This side of the dollar is about things that are bad about capitalism – money going to war, the United States and its economic imperialism, the idea that people feel that they have to spend money on stupid material things, living beyond their means, becoming stressed out and in debt, and so on and so forth. Paying high interest rates should be illegal; credit card companies are predatory; the predatory mortgage crisis. There are a lot of problems with capitalism and that's what regulation is for. Regulation should be to protect people from the bad side of capitalism. Bush did a lot of deregulation and now Obama who is trying to re-regulate some things is called a socialist. Yep, it's awesome, right? All right, there we go.

Sarah Banet-Weiser: I want to make sure that we have time for questions. But I first





wanted to ask if you had anything to say to someone who is interested in using art to critique or as politics. Could you talk about the possibility of this? It would be better to have more people putting up art in public spaces than buying more Glenn Beck books.

Shepard Fairey: A lot of people could make powerful work. I see fairly consistently that people are fearful of crossing over, or blurring the lines between different categories. If you're a fine artist, for example, you can't be political. If you're a graphic designer, no one will take you seriously as a fine artist. If you make a clothing line then won't be seen as a serious fine artist, et cetera, et cetera. For quite a while I felt that I didn't necessarily have enough knowledge about certain things to make political commentary. But then I realized, the people actually making the policy obviously have less knowledge, so I think I'm safe.

Sarah Banet-Weiser: Yeah, I'm with you on that.

Shepard Fairey: I can't speak for anyone else, but the convergence of the things I'm passionate about – making pictures, solving visual problems, commenting on things that are going on in the world – this is the only way to go for me. Anyone who feels the same way shouldn't hold themselves back because of silly categories that are out there.

I've had to rethink some of my approaches to things because early in my career I wanted to have my screen printing company, have print contract jobs for people, have my equipment there to make my own street art and eventually people would buy the posters. It didn't work like that. I couldn't make enough money. So I became a graphic designer instead so I could hone my skills. If you want something,

“...the convergence of the things I'm passionate about – making pictures, solving visual problems, commenting on things that are going on in the world – this is the only way to go for me.”

-Shepard Fairey

just figure out different ways to do it.

If there's somebody else doing it and succeeding at it, get an internship. All these people who have interned with me – they may not have the exact skill set that I'm looking for. But if they have the passion I'm always going to be open to that because people who seem very passionate about the things they care about are the ones who will improve. They will develop the skills. And I've seen that happen over and over again.

The idea that a job is a job and it's okay. It's a paycheck and one of these days I'm going to do this or that. My idea is, "just do it, you know?" That's action. Action is important.

Sarah Banet-Weiser: That's a good place to open it up for Q&A.

Audience member: This is a two-part question. One, could you tell one of the better stories about getting arrested? And two, will you sign my poster after this is over?

Shepard Fairey: Yes, I will. Wow, there has been a lot of stories about being arrested. I'm going to have to keep it brief. But I've gotten arrested by the vandal squad in New York twice. I was arrested in 1996 and they asked me if I was the guy who was doing all the Andre stuff. I hadn't been arrested in New York before, and the guy was actually charming. He was like, "Look, if you tell me the truth, I'm going to let you go." And I have too much faith in humanity, so I said, "Yeah, I'm the guy who's been doing all the Andre stuff. But I'm getting ready to move to California and so this is sort of my last big trip." And he goes over to his squad car and is like, "Sarge, Sarge, we got the Andre guy." And all of a sudden, all of these cars show up and they take me in.

I had a messenger bag with a couple stencils, spray paint cans, 300 stickers, 80 posters, in all of these different varieties. They lay everything out in different baggies on the table and say, "Welcome to your new home. You're going to be here for awhile." And they parade





everybody from the precinct through to see all the booty. And I was scared. But they couldn't get the building owner to press charges. So all they had was spray paint, which they call a "tool of criminal mischief" when they think it's in association. If it's an old guy who says, "I'm repainting my rocking chair." They're not going to arrest him for possession of a tool of criminal mischief. But in conjunction with the other paraphernalia on my person they used that. But I got out time served.

Four years later, in 2000, I'm putting this sticker up and all of a sudden three Guido guys are around me. They pull their shirts up and show me their badges. Then I recognized the one guy from the last incident. But I had a Tony Hawk floppy 80s do before, and it was the 90's so it was way past the expiration date. And this time I had shaved my head. And the guy was like, "What are you doing with all this Andre stuff? We caught the real Andre guy." And he was telling the story about that. And then his sidekick was like, "What? It's the Andre guy? I've been wanting one of those for my toolbox for years." And so they emptied my pockets and they get all this stuff. But this story goes on. It's in my book. So if you want to hear the rest of the story, you must buy my book.

Sarah Banet-Weiser: See? Commerce, politics...there you go.

Shepard Fairey: Right. But anyway, it actually got even funnier from there, but I don't want to waste everyone's time with that right now.

Audience member: Hi. I was wondering if you could actually speak on your ongoing court case with the AP? Can you talk about that at this time?

Shepard Fairey: Sure.

Audience member: I read recently in the New York Times that you actually told

the authorities that you used one picture, but you actually used a different picture for the portrait. I was wondering what your motivation was behind not initially telling the truth. Were you sending a message with that?



Shepard Fairey: No. Despite what the AP says, it is actually a mistake that the tighter-crop image was a crop from the wider image. I can't talk about the details of it, because it's ongoing right now. But anyway, it was an honest mistake. And then when I realized that I'd made a mistake, we were already into the case and then I was too scared to come forward with it. It's going to be something I regret for the rest of my life. I did something a little bit dastardly, which I shouldn't have done. I'm an honest person and it was a very, very difficult confluence of circumstances that led me to make a bad decision.

“Copyright law is interpreted more and more in a way that benefits corporate interests.”

-Shepard Fairey

That is actually not a relevant factor to the fair-use argument in the case. And that's what I want to bring the discussion back to, because the two photos were shot during the same photo session, seconds apart. The AP is fixated on that because it's a good distraction from what the core issue of the case is, and that's whether someone can use a photographic reference to generate a piece of art without it being copyright infringement. If you look at artists like Van Gogh, Degas, Rauschenberg, Warhol, clearly art history suggests that this is a perfectly legitimate practice.

This is the bad side of capitalism. Copyright law is interpreted more and more in a way that benefits corporate interests. For example, Disney can do their interpretation of Grimm's Fairy Tales and then no one else. Though historically they've been reinterpreted generation after generation, now no one else will ever be able to reinterpret them again because Disney will sue them.

The main issue, especially with a politician, is in terms of political speech. Would I be able to get a portrait sitting with Barack Obama? No. Does that mean I shouldn't be able to make a poster that shares my endorsement of Barack Obama?



“...my First Amendment rights are being diminished if I have to license any image that I’m going to make into an art piece.

–Shepard Fairey

What the AP wants is ridiculous. Not only would you have to license the photo from them, but they would have to approve the licensing application. The law firm representing the AP is the same one representing Ken Starr. I wouldn’t say necessarily they’re a right-wing organization. But if they didn’t want me to make a poster endorsing Barack Obama, they could have said if I was willing to pay the money to license the photo, they could have said, “We’re not going to license it to you for that use.”

So it restricts free speech. I speak with images. That’s my form of expression. So my First Amendment rights are being diminished if I have to license any image that I’m going to make into an art piece. I believe in intellectual property. I believe in copyright. I believe that if someone makes something, someone else shouldn’t be able to make the exact same creation and sell it where it competes with the original – a bootleg, if you will. However, there are principles in fair use, which is my argument in the case. There’s also another principle that I’ll talk about in a second.

This is all stuff I’m allowed to talk about. You can go on Google like I did to get the image. The principles of fair use asks, is the image aesthetically transformative? Is the context transformative? Is it used in a capacity that doesn’t compete with the market for the original? The original was a 2006 Darfur panel photograph – a news photograph. The photographer did not control Obama’s wardrobe, makeup, pose or anything, no creative input. Is there a component of parody, social commentary, or some form of education in the image? I think social commentary. So I think that in pretty much every principle, every guideline for fair use, my image definitely tests positive.

Something has to have elements that are copyrightable. Obama’s face by itself is not copyrightable without any creative input from the photographer. So the

AP's only argument is about their ownership of copyright on the image, since I didn't use the background. I didn't use anything that's actually photographic in the image. The photographer waited until that one precise moment that no one else could have captured. However, we have a reel of 350 photos that are virtually identical from the shoot. So there you go. There's my whole case, in a nutshell.

Audience Member: I was just wondering if you draw any inspiration or if your work inspires any other guerilla artist, sort of like Banksy or any other artists in the street art genre?

Shepard Fairey: Banksy's an old friend of mine and I know that we have influenced each other. He's one of the people doing work that I really like. There's a lot of people in street art who inspired me, and a lot of people who I know that I've inspired. It's embarrassing to brag about who I've inspired or whatever, you know? Some people who are out there doing stuff in L.A. and New York are definitely people who I inspired. I don't think that the work that I do is technically dazzling. I think that I'm a hard worker and that I use techniques that are very accessible.

The thing I'm most proud of is creating a template that should be empowering to people, that all these methods are very, very simple and effective. It's like how punk rock came along in the 70s and said you don't have to play like *Yes* or *Emerson, Lake and Palmer* and do these noodling four-hour solos or whatever. You can play three chords and have something to say and make a difference. That's what I'm trying to do with art.

Audience Member: I was intrigued by your first story about the Andre the Giant sticker and how you put it up all over the place. You basically generated enough buzz that the newspaper wanted to talk about it. I thought to myself, "Well, a lot of advertisers do that



now." I don't know if this is the best example, but the Gatorade campaign with just the "G." They basically did the same thing – put an ambiguous image out in space in order to sell their product. I was wondering if you could comment on the technique of putting an image in space. You do it to critique capitalism; they're doing the same thing to sell their product.

Shepard Fairey: Well, the name of my book is *Supply and Demand*. And the reason I chose that name is because observing how things cycle through culture based on supply and demand has been fascinating. Guerilla marketing, if you will. What I did with Andre is an experiment in phenomenology. Once people see value in reaching those hard-to-reach, elusive hipster consumers with guerilla marketing, they're going to do it. That's what the companies are going to do. Most people are sophisticated enough to smell the corporate rat. But sometimes I think companies do stuff that is actually genuinely creative. And whether it actually compels people to buy their products or not, it's something that's interesting to see on the street.

I don't make any sort of blanket statements like, "Street art good; corporations bad." There are some street artists who are total assholes, you know? Seeing their stuff up and knowing them, I'm like, "Arghhh," you know? There are some corporations that are horrible, horrible, and there are some corporations that are cool and support artists and do creative stuff. If they're going to do advertising it might as well be stuff that's interesting to look at, and I'm fine with seeing it.

But I think it's great that people would see something and be like, "Is this a street art campaign or is it a corporation?" They analyze it closely and they're scrutinizing. That's great.

Audience member: I appreciate your statement that everything is propaganda. But along with that comes responsibility. So I have two questions for you. You have used your art to frame the great leader, in a way that has some Maoist sort of

overtone of the great leader. Now that the great leader is in place and you said, “I’m not going to victimize others.” But the great leader is victimizing innocent people on the other side of the planet and has not tackled any of the fourth amendment problems with the Patriot Act. What’s your responsibility around that?

Secondly, are you familiar with two pieces of street art that critique this type of thing? The first is the *Deception Dollar* about the facts of 9/11, showing that it was more like a fascist situation as horrific performance art than what we were told. The second one is the Obama Joker poster that was started in L.A. and spread around the world.



Shepard Fairey: I’m definitely familiar with the Joker poster. I’ve said that I don’t agree with the politics of the Joker poster, but it was really effective. Good propaganda works on anybody. You don’t have to be smart to figure out that Joker poster; it’s simple.



The best possible step for a two-party political system that is inherently flawed was for Obama to be in office. Should I be mad now that I did something that supported Obama and he’s president, or should I feel a little bit more comfortable that things aren’t even worse – which they would have been with McCain. McCain was far more of a hawk than Obama. Obama rooted for Afghanistan because if he didn’t people would have seen him as very naïve on national defense. The reality is, he definitely wanted to get out of Iraq right away. But everyone is saying, “You’re going to destabilize the country.” Like we’re the ones who destabilized it in the first place. And with Afghanistan, he’s obviously having some second thoughts about.

Now that Obama is in office, I’m trying to make images that push issues that I care about. I made posters already like the Vietnam POW/MIA logo, but it’s Guantanamo. It’s *POW-USA*. And I’m still making stuff to try to get Guantanamo closed down. I’m not Obama’s



cheerleader. I'm not going to support everything Obama does, even if I don't agree with. Obama was a step in the right direction. I voted for Ralph Nader in 2000. That's an unrealistic proposition, really, getting Ralph Nader elected. There's a lot of things that I'd change if I could. But I can't. So I make art about things that I want to make a statement about.

Audience Member: And the *Deception Dollar*? Because it's a precursor to your Obey Dollar stuff.

Shepard Fairey: No, I haven't seen that. But it sounds awesome. It's like those guys who make the fake *New York Times* stuff.

Audience Member: The *Yes Men*, yeah.

Shepard Fairey: The *Yes Men*, yeah. They put out the bundles of papers that are written in the style Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert. But it's great.

Sarah Banet-Weiser: I also think that the *Rolling Stone* cover also addresses your question in the way that you use your art not to be a cheerleader. But to say, "Okay, so we had this sentiment of hope and progress and change and it fueled a large part of this country. So now what? What are you doing?"

Shepard Fairey: A lot of people told me, "Obama's going to turn out to be just like anybody else." Well, that's what I said in 2000. And that's why I voted for Nader. But we would have been in much better shape if Gore had been president.

Shepard Fairey: Let's just think about the eight years of Bush and how different things might have been. They might not have been great under Gore, but they still would have been better.

Audience Member: There was an image that resonated with me up there. It was a female figure, veiled. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about that.

Shepard Fairey: Sure. The West has this xenophobic reactionary thing to Arabs and Muslims. In particular, that they're all extremist jihadist terrorists. But I think that most people just want to live their lives in peace. It doesn't matter what culture they're from or what religion they are. Then there are others – it doesn't matter if they're Christian or Republicans or Democrats, who are extremists in whatever they are into. They use religion as a tool to justify these extreme views. That's an unhealthy way of generalizing an entire population, by what only a small, extreme group does.

My idea with the *Peace Fingers*, with the Arab woman with the peace sign, was to say there's humanity everywhere and let's try to look for the good in people. Empathy is a very, very important emotion that encourages people not to victimize others.


Audience Member: I wanted to thank you for bringing up those *Iran Contradiction* posters. I remember seeing them in my childhood and they had a great effect on me. But I had completely forgotten about them. One street art that has caught my eye of late are the bears. I read that it was an old intern of yours that creates these stencils around town.

Shepard Fairey: He was one of the people I might have brought up, but since you did I don't have to. Phil Lumbang does these black and white bears. They shake hands and it's a very sweet sentiment. He's a nice kid and he's not incredibly politically sophisticated. But, even in the street art world, he sees a lot of negativity and competition. He wants to put something positive out there. He's taken it to the streets and always paints during the day. Cops have come up and said, "Do you have permission to paint on this building?" And he'll answer, "Oh, do you need to?" And they are so disarmed by a weird Filipino kid painting



Phil Lumbang, *How Do You Do?*
Echo Park, Los Angeles

bears in the middle of the day that they don't arrest him. I think it's great.



Audience Member: It came up how hipsters are particularly interested in your work, your clothing line, your more consumable goods. Hipsters are not known to be that apt to activism and pushing against the system. How do you feel about your responsibility of getting your message out – your message of responsibility in action – throughout all of your work? Or to what extent do you feel that you should do that?

Sarah Banet-Weiser: I was the one, but I didn't mean to connect hipsters with the work if you didn't want the connection.

Shepard Fairey: I might be at the tail end of the hipster cycle by now anyway. But I'm always making new designs. I responded to album covers, skateboard graphics and tee shirts far more passionately than I did to galleries and museums. One of the most important things for me is to be a populist, to be accessible. Maybe 80% of the people who buy a tee shirt of mine that has some political commentary in it – not every tee shirt I make does, but many of them do – may just buy it because it's a hipster uniform. It's more about status. It's not about that they give a shit. But for the other 20%, they might feel strongly. Then they might share the idea with others. That gives me some optimism and makes me feel like the hipster is not hopeless. My hope is that when the cool dust settles, the real point of the shirt will rub off.

Sarah Banet-Weiser: I want to thank you for a great conversation.

Shepard Fairey: Thank you.

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