



Street Art's Day in the Sun

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by **Tom Matlack**

Months before the February 6th opening of his 20-year retrospective show "Supply and Demand" at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, Shepard Fairey furiously worked on the show outside the museum walls with help from curator Pedro Alonzo. Fairey, born and raised in South Carolina, and Alonzo, a Mexican who fell into the modern art world by smuggling gallery books across the Mexican border, installed OBEY images strategically throughout the metropolitan Boston area, in Harvard and Central Squares, on the railroad bridge that crosses Storrow Drive next to Boston University, on the wall of Fenway Park overlooking the Massachusetts Turnpike.

In many ways Shepard Fairey's (designer of the famous Obama "hope" poster) work is an ad campaign making fun of ad campaigns. It's his consistency of message that has earned him respect. He is the McDonalds of guerilla art.

But the spot that turned out to be the most problematic was a friend's back wall in the South End. It was late at night by the time Fairey and Alonzo got there. The image, of an Asian woman reminiscent of Fairey's wife, isn't his most well known. So a neighbor thought sure they were skateboard punks putting up graffiti—which actually they were, except that Fairey is also the world famous artist who's portrait of Barack Obama was on the cover of *Time* when President-Elect was named "Man of the Year"—and eventually called the cops. The next morning, after the cops left, the owner of the wall woke to a stunning new image on his property that made him feel like "it was Christmas".

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Shepard Fairey grew up in conservative Charleston, South Carolina. He never fit in. As an adolescent he felt alienated because no one else liked the punk music and skateboarding that were his life. He made his own t-shirts and reproduced images that went along with his alternative life-style. But when he got to the Rhode Island School of Design in the late 1980s, he realized his punk music and boarding weren't all that edgy outside of South Carolina. He had to come up with something far more innovative. "At that point he was challenged with the pivotal question, 'What am I going to do that's original? I can't just copy things anymore,'" his friend and curator Alonzo reports.

In 1989, Fairey designed the "Andre has a Posse" sticker. Andre was the biggest, most famous World Wrestling Federation superstar at that time. Fairey was using the image, along with the exaggerated "7'4" 520 lb" mug shot, to show irreverence.

The "posse" was meant to include all like minded radicals, an exclusive group who thought this monster was actually cool. He put the sticker up around RISD and was shocked by the response: people loved it. "To him what was a joke—he was just experimenting—but it turned out he hit on something," Alonzo recalls. When he saw how much attention the sticker got, he put them all over

Providence and then went to the big city, Boston, to put them up in Harvard Square. As momentum grew, a light bulb went on in Fairey's head: he turned Andre into a self-financed global campaign. At first he printed the images on sticky paper and cutting them up himself. He went to New York City and slept in his car. He put ads in skate magazines and sent people free stickers. Even rival art students at other schools became obsessed with putting up Andre stickers and the attack it represented. It was a guerilla assault on the cities.

By the early '90s Andre seemingly covered the Earth with his art. "People always talk about this place in Amsterdam," Alonzo says. "Shep's concern was just to get it out. He's one of the most focused, dedicated people I have ever met. When I've been with him, he won't eat the whole fucking day if he is working. He won't stop, just work, work, work. All his peer artists say that we are lucky he so great because if he wasn't the world would be covered in his shit. He is relentless." Fairey eventually simplified the Andre image to create an icon of his face. Over time his media developed from Xerox on sticky paper to an industrial-guage process.

John Carpenter's 1988 movie *They Live* became an inspiration for Fairey's ultimate branding. It tells the story of a down-on-his-luck construction worker who discovers a pair of special sunglasses. Wearing them, he is able to see the world as it really is: people being bombarded by the media and by government with messages like "OBEY", "CONFORM", "MARRY AND REPRODUCE", "CONSUME", "WATCH TELEVISION" and "SLEEP". The protagonist of the movie is able to see that some usually normal-looking people are in fact ugly aliens in charge of the massive campaign to keep humans subdued. It's through this thought control that the aliens have this world tied up and neatly packaged for its own manipulative uses, to further themselves at the expense of the meek, mild and the lowly sufferers of a jobless and hungry world. Fairey closely identified with this battle of self-awareness: one man's struggle with a reality check that has these alien beings staging war against the up-rising and rebellious armies from the gutters and streets. From this movie Fairey's enduring brand, "OBEY" was born.

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"I grew up in a brothel over the border in Tijuana," Pedro Alonzo jokes. In fact his dad was an architect. Alonzo had an interest in art from a young age. "In college I paid my bills by smuggling art books across the border from Tecnológico de Monterrey," he continues now for real. He runs his hands through his unkempt curly brown hair as he speaks. His full cheeks and dark handsome features are reminiscent of Javier Bardem in *No Country for Old Men*, only without a mean bone in his body. Alonzo takes art seriously, but laughs at the roundabout way he came to his passion. "It was easy to talk my way out of books," Alonzo says. The border guards assumed he had drugs because of his beard and long hair. They couldn't quite believe he was really just carrying boxes of books. One time he asked a border guard if he could go get a drink after driving three hours through the desert in his jeep with no top. "Yeah," the guard told him. "But if you run, I will shoot you!"

Alonzo was a summer intern at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City and eventually began to curate shows at the Institute of Visual Arts (INOVA) at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee. In Milwaukee he was introduced to Yoshitomo Nara and later Takashi Murakami. Still in the book business, Pedro began distributing the Japanese artist's books and this lead him to work with various publishers from Japan including Little More. It was through these hyper hip publishers that he stumbled across a whole group of artists such as Barry McGee, Kaws and then finally found Sheppard Fairey.

During February of 2006 Alonzo curated "Spank the Monkey", a breakthrough show of 20 street

artists at the Baltic Center for Contemporary Art in Newcastle England. To many in the art world, this was the moment when urban/graffiti/guerilla artists moved over to the mainstream art world. "Beautiful Loser", a show that toured America in 2005, also contributed to the transformation. But Alonzo brought Fairey to Newcastle and commissioned him to do his largest piece of work ever, a vinyl mural 100 meters long and eight meters high. Fairey and Alonzo both felt the show had to have two parts: what was in the museum but even more important, what was in the city itself.

The Baltic was able to negotiate in kind support from advertising companies so Fairey's work showed up at bus stops and train stations all over Newcastle. "Shep's work is about questioning advertising," Alonzo says. "By inserting it into another layer of society it became even more powerful. All the sudden Shep's portraits were showing up between an ad for condoms and an ad for whiskey." He also got billboards inside the subway stations and, to his great surprise, received rave reviews from the public officials in charge of Graffiti control. "We were bringing a global hero to Newcastle. By putting up Shep's work, we saved the city a huge amount of money because no one would touch those walls. They were shrines to the graffiti legend."

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In many ways Sheppard Fairey's work is an ad campaign making fun of ad campaigns. It's his consistency of message that has earned him respect. He is the McDonalds of guerilla art. He has had amazing success in getting his message out so that a remarkably large number of people recognize it. But it's only recently that his brilliance is being appreciated for its aesthetic beauty, both in terms of the content of the work and the way it takes the existing advertising model and turns it on its head.

After the success of the original Andre campaign, Fairey began to make prints to make money, to help finance his brand and pay his bills. He also became a very hot graphic designer, doing real ad campaigns for Madison Avenue firms who wanted to associate themselves with someone who had street "rep". "Most artists become commoditized, like the Rolling Stones," Alonzo points out. "But with Shep there is this counter-culture lifestyle where he is able to reconcile his art with commercial work. He's been able to maintain an authenticity that is compelling and interesting and edgy and not sell out but still make money. He has a family and has figured out how to support them while still sticking to his own unique voice one-hundred percent."

We grow up being bombarded with imagery trying to sell us something. Design has been developed to make us think certain things are cool. The artist does something cool that is taken over by the brand and the artist does something else that they think is cool and taken over by the brand. Kids develop an aesthetic appreciation. Sheppard Fairey has made a huge contribution because every kid has been affected by him in their sense of aesthetic, sense of fashion, sense of self. These designs represent something. Kids look at them and they like them, they think they are cool even if they have no idea who Shep Fairey is. Most artists don't have that impact. His influence on our culture is tremendous.

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For all the many images Sheppard Fairey has created over the last two decades, perhaps the most influential is the portrait of Barack Obama, which became a logo for the campaign and covered countless city walls across the country, was worn by nearly each of the million people who crowded into Grant Park on the night Obama won the election, and most recently appeared on the cover of *Time*.

Fairey's portraits have always been about protest, from Martin Luther King to Malcom X to George

W. Bush with fangs. "When he started to do this work, his heroes were people like Bob Marley and Noam Chomsky," Alonzo says. Shepard had traditionally had a very critical attitude toward politicians. But he was moved by Obama and wanted to do a portrait to contribute to the cause. He was concerned that his work might in fact have a negative effect on the campaign because of his rebellious past. He decided to do it anyways.

"Obama is a turning in Shep's career because 'Hope' wasn't just for Obama it was hope for him too personally," Alonzo points out. "It was hope in a way he had never seen or felt before." Obama himself loved the image. He sent Shep a personal letter of thanks. Shep truly had gone mainstream when his Obama appeared on the cover of the Democratic National Committee Survival Guide. The image was a great benefit to the campaign but it was also a profound turning point in Fairey's work. He had taken a completely different, more optimistic, tone.

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In Boston, there are two parts to the show that opens February 6th: what's inside and what's outside. Inside, there are images on paper, wood, metal, walls, record covers and skate board decks. The images speak to our current predicament. Fairey digs into issues of war and wealth. He has spent much of the last few years looking closely at the design of currency as a way to show the two sides of capitalism, both its power and its excesses. "He takes the design we are all so familiar with and subverts it into something different that makes us reconsider our own reality," Alonzo says. At his core, Fairey is still using his art as a guerilla tool to fight back against those that would take advantage of their power. "He's waking us up, questioning pre-conceived notions calling us to action." Fundamentally, the work is based on the belief that until we act, others will take advantage of us.

Outside the walls of the Institute of Contemporary Art, OBEY is everywhere in the community from the South End to Harvard Square. Like the very first Andre sticker two decades ago, the movement's power is organic. OBEY is adored by a whole generation across the world, most of whom never set foot in an art museum. The fact that Shepard Fairey's work is now on the cover of *Time* and has a major show at the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art doesn't change his fundamental influence one bit: he is just fucking cool.

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