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The New Aesthetics of Patriotism

Among the many changes in American society signaled by the election of Barack Obama to the Presidency is a new aesthetic of American patriotism. This can be seen, in one way, in the fact that Barack and Michelle Obama have begun to change the art that is displayed on the White House walls, which has throughout the history of the nation consisted of images of famous Presidents, landscapes of the American West, and innocuous still lifes. According to the *Wall Street Journal* (Chozick and Crow, 2009):

The Obamas are sending ripples through the art world as they put the call out to museums, galleries, and private collectors that they'd like to borrow modern art by African American, Asian, Hispanic and female artists for the White House. In a sharp departure from the 19th-century still lifes, pastorals and portraits that dominate the White House's public rooms, they are choosing bold, abstract art works.

Modern art works by Jasper Johns, Richard Diebenkorn, Josef Albers, and perhaps most intriguingly Ed Ruscha (a work featuring the words 'I Think Maybe I'll . . . Maybe . . . No . . . Maybe . . . Yes . . . On Second Thought. Wait a Minute . . .') are now on loan to the White House from the National Gallery of Art, replacing the more traditional art previously borrowed not only by the Bush White House but by its predecessors. The presence of such work has fueled many imaginations, including that of *Wall Street Journal* reporters who mused about the famously contemplative president sitting before his Ruscha, ruminating over a political compromise.

The Bush White House not surprisingly had featured a significant number of paintings about Texas as well as plenty of cowboy kitsch. This included Bush's favorite painting *A Charge to Keep*, which depicts a lone cowboy riding his horse up a hill followed by a pack of riders, an image from a pulp cowboy story about a thief fleeing a posse that Bush had mythologized as the lone 'determined horseman' who has a 'difficult trail' (Blumenthal, 2007). It's worth noting that Laura Bush, on the other hand, lobbied hard to acquire a work by African American artist Jacob Lawrence, *The Builders*, which features black workers at a construction site. Nevertheless, traditional American patriotic kitsch personified the aesthetic of the Bush Administration in ways that have been quite typical of the White House's occupants (with the rare exception, as often noted, of the Kennedys); even the most recent democratic occupant, Bill Clinton, cannot be said to have had a modern art aesthetic, or any aesthetic at all for that matter.

The changes in the White House collection have an immediate impact in the world of art collectors, dealers and Smithsonian curators, but the changing aesthetic of American patriotism that accompanied this election is likely to have much more long-term impact. The aesthetics of the Obama campaign and of the image economy that emerged around his candidacy (much of which was inspired by his candidacy but not generated by his campaign) signal both new kinds of patriotic image-making and practices of viewing, all

indicative of a contemporary image culture of pastiche, play and remix that is now engaging with the meaning of America.

This emergence of a new political aesthetic can be defined in many ways by the emphasis on style that defines contemporary image culture: an ease with branding culture, a cross-class low-brow to middle-brow to high-brow mixing of cultural forms from hip hop to jazz to modern and postmodern art, an aesthetic of pastiche and citation. Style is a key feature of brand culture and the dislodging of style from content (in particular, political content) is also a key aspect of postmodern style. Style is a key feature of this President's public persona and appeal – the kind of style that appears to come without effort to someone of cosmopolitan and complex origins. It is easy to see this as a given of political personas but, in fact, most political style is painfully stilted in its orchestration and obvious in its focus-group-guided talking-points and photo-op restrictions. More importantly, the Obama Administration's style, as signaled through its own image culture and that it has inspired, is indicative of a connection, perhaps the first in American history, between mainstream political culture and the style of youth culture, characterized today by remix, irony and play.

Perhaps the best way to make clear this changing aesthetic is to look at the remarkable trajectory into mainstream political and national culture of Shepard Fairey's campaign poster for Obama. Fairey is emblematic of a new kind of cultural producer, at home with brand culture and political activism simultaneously. He began as a street artist who became known for his quirky André the Giant graffiti; he currently runs a clothing line under the Obey Giant logo (with the slogan 'Manufacturing Dissent Since 1989'), has a cult following for whom he produces weekly political posters online, and has recently been the subject of a major retrospective at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Boston (while he, nevertheless, continues to get arrested for street postering). In the contemporary image culture in which branding, a neoliberal ethos, pastiche aesthetics and digital remixing exist simultaneously, Fairey is successful though not necessarily unique. Yet, his influence on political and patriotic culture is.

The Obama poster defines a particular kind of viewer, one who is accustomed to reading images as references and citations. While the poster deploys the clichés of celebrity and political affirmation in its image of a leader looking off toward an imagined horizon, it effectively recodes its political discourse in a way that interpellates viewers as adept at reading style as a form of reference. The colors of the image signal but do not replicate the red, white and blue of American patriotism (the white is off-white, the blue is light), thus playing with the codes of the flag while deliberately not reproducing them. The image quite self-consciously deploys the visual style of graphic poster design used by the Bolshevik agitprop artists of the 1920s, giving the work a sense of political urgency. The image thus combines a modern kind of hope and optimism recoded through postmodern styles, in that the image signals the texture of early political posters (as does much of Fairey's work). In other words, Fairey uses contemporary screen printing to

evoke the patterned lines of newsprint that signify agitprop political posters run off a modern press, yet he does so in a self-conscious way. His work is also situated within the modern legacy of Andy Warhol, with its strategy of taking an image of an iconic figure and screen-printing color into it. In a certain sense, then, the Obama poster image signals in every element of its style a reference to a previous style or image convention that it plays with to a certain degree.

This is, in many ways, an entirely new aesthetic for American political discourse, and its circulation out of art circles into the political mainstream has been stunning. It went from being an unofficial poster in support of the campaign to an official Obama campaign poster in an updated version (the campaign was reluctant to adapt the original image that had been illegally postered, and so it asked for a new version, with the word 'HOPE'). The poster became the source of an enormous number of knock-offs, from refrigerator magnets to the Obamicon website at which users can insert themselves and their own slogan into their own poster version.¹ Another version of the poster was then adapted by Fairey into a White-House sanctioned Inauguration Day poster and formed the template for a Fairey-produced *TIME Magazine* cover on Obama as Person of the Year; the 'HOPE' poster was then acquired by the Smithsonian for the National Portrait Gallery. It is safe to say that at that moment it became part of the official national collection of the Smithsonian, the poster had indicated a dramatic shift in the traditional aesthetic of American patriotic culture.

It is not incidental, perhaps, that Fairey's poster deploys an aesthetic that has had an historical relationship with Marxist culture, which is a key feature of his style. Fairey recently produced an ad campaign for the Saks Fifth Avenue department store that features a model with a raised fist evoking Socialist Realist art and designed with a Rodchenko-style Constructionist aesthetic of red and black. Constructionist graphic styles have a long history of appropriation. It could be fairly argued that the use of Soviet styles of graphic poster by Fairey and other designers reduces such styles to mere graphics in ways that render their political form into free-floating signifiers easily attached to brands. Yet, this reveals precisely the ease with which Marxist style is incorporated into contemporary (neoliberal) brand culture. Let's not forget the 1998 rebranding of the *Communist Manifesto* itself on its 150th anniversary into a stylish version designed by Komar and Melamid, which fit neatly into contemporary lifestyles; as Verso's Managing Director Colin Robinson noted at the time: 'You can read it with your latte at Barnes & Noble' (Haberman, 1998).

What is potentially more dramatic about the entry of the Fairey poster into the Smithsonian collection of patriotic art is its deployment of image play that borders on irony. On one hand, the poster is clearly an effective affirmation of the then-candidate and his message of hope and change. On the other hand, its aesthetic of referencing and image play also creates an ironic subtext. It is safe to say that the style of irony has had no history in official American patriotic culture. The history of patriotic, nation-affirming

images in the United States has been decidedly un-ironic embraces of US exceptionalism, power and deployments of a mythic culture of American innocence. Indeed, as I have argued at length elsewhere (Sturken, 2007), kitsch has long been the primary aesthetic of American patriotism – not the recoded, ironic kitsch of retro artifacts but un-ironic images and objects that offer prepackaged emotional registers in order to signal affiliation with the myth of the nation. Obama has, of course, also been the source of a significant amount of kitsch, from cheap inaugural knock-offs to a broad array of amateur art that imagines him as a figure with close-to-messiah status.

Shepard Fairey embodies this new patriotic aesthetic, but of course it arose from the participation in the campaign and election of a broad set of cultural producers across a range of media and professional status, from will.i.am's video *Yes We Can* to an enormous number of user-generated images that circulated on the web (along with lots of Fairey poster knock-offs). Yet, my sense that we are witnessing an aesthetic shift is derived from the ways in which new kinds of style became an official part of the campaign and now, following, in the White House. This was evident in the Obama campaign logo, which so resonated with youth culture that it was almost immediately used as inspiration for the new Pepsi logo. It has been referred to as the 'hardest working presidential candidate logo' with its clever play on the 'O' of Obama with the image of a sunrise evoking change, and its color scheme subtly signifying patriotism and the flag.² Here again, the play on traditional codes of American patriotism is clear, from the suggestion of a field of wheat waving in the wind (a key American icon) and of sunrise (evoking Reagan's very powerful 'Morning in America' theme of the 1980s). Simple, evocative, yet subtle. It was designed by Sol Sender of Sender LLC in Chicago in collaboration with mo/de, and was used in highly adaptable ways in the campaign. The 'O' of Obama has already provided much fodder for news headlines and political cartoons.

It was amusing to hear that when Bush showed Obama the Oval Office for the first time right after the election, he took him on his standard tour of the kitschy artifacts in his personal collection on display there. One can only imagine the aesthetic disconnect the then-President-Elect might have felt in that moment, perhaps in quietly finally 'measuring the curtains'. Political reporter Sidney Blumenthal (2007) has written about the 'peculiar aesthetics propagated in the age of George W. Bush' with its 'contradictory styles of softening nostalgia and hardening cruelty'. Blumenthal saw Bush kitsch as a rejection of the Reagan-era kitsch of patriotic sentiment, stating that 'under Bush, kitsch has been transformed from sentimentality to sadomasochism.' The kitschy (and brutal) cowboy aesthetic of the Bush Administration has finally run its course, and a new aesthetic, one that rejects kitsch for a nuanced play off the visual codes that evoke America, is emerging in its place.

Acknowledgement

I am indebted to Lisa Cartwright's analysis of the Fairey poster in our book *Practices of Looking* (Oxford University Press, 2nd edition, 2009).

Notes

1. <http://obamiconme.pastemagazine.com/>
2. <http://www.underconsideration.com/speakup/archives/004262.html>

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Obama and Shepard Fairey: The Copy and Political Iconography in the Age of the Demake

Of what, exactly, is the Shepard Fairey 'HOPE' poster a copy? Early in 2009, the Associated Press (AP) made headlines by threatening to sue graphic artist Shepard Fairey for infringement of copyright, claiming that he had reproduced a photograph taken by one of their staff photographers in making the red, white and blue graphic 'HOPE' poster that became the chief icon of Barack Obama's presidential campaign. The poster had just been acquired by the Smithsonian Institution's National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC, through a donation from lobbyists and art collectors Heather and Tony Podesta, the sister-in-law and brother of John Podesta, a co-chair of the Obama administration's transition team. Mannie Garcia, the photographer in question, initially disputed the AP's claim to the media, not to say that Obama's use was fair, but to state that when he took the photograph in question, one among hundreds he shot at a press conference about Darfur in 2006, he was in fact working freelance for the AP; the rights to the photograph were therefore his and not the AP's. Fairey readily admitted that Garcia's photograph of then Senator Obama and the actor George Clooney was referenced in his construction of the work – and why