



from punk to Proudhon?

An auto-biographical look at the poster, design,
and screenprinting ideas of Garage Collective



Read And Destroy!

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'artist' while grounding their work in the realities of everyday life — in our communities and in the workplace. Whether this takes form as a co-operative print shop, art and screenprint workshops, community art or poster projects, or something else entirely — is something that I feel really excited (and challenged) to explore.

Thankfully, these ideas are not located in a void. Print collectives such as the Justseeds Visual Resistance Artists' Co-Operative, designers and websites such as those found in the Groundswell Collective, various exhibitions and community projects such as the Peoples History Project, Street Art Workers, and Paper Politics, as well as designers and artists (both home and abroad) — all are beginning to counter the webs of hegemony and control with their own communal and egalitarian forms of artistic solidarity — between practitioners and people, between creativity and community.

Alternatives to the mainstream conception of art and design do exist. It's just a matter of creating them ourselves.

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Ultimately, cultural production is the most direct means available to me at this point, and as such, seem to be the most logical way to approach the vices of everyday life — vices which are not only perpetuated by social, economic, and political means, but increasingly cultural as well.

Cultural production, such as print and electronic media, plays an integral role in the current way of life. It is the means by which a monopoly of content and control by a few over the rest of us is kept in check. Consumption, and the spectacle of consumption, contribute to the alienation and social poverty we currently experience. “The powers that be are no dummies: they know that power largely rests on the unfettered spread of emotion, on illusions of success, symbols of strength, orders to consume, and elegies to violence” (Eduardo Galeano in “Upside Down”). Mass culture not only encourages us to buy and sell, it actively maintains the necessary prejudices and stereotypes that keep division, isolation and fear prominent in our class-based society.

Design is a conscious proponent of this hegemonic process, and an affluent one at that. That is why it is increasingly important to create alternative cultural perspectives or values, and illustrate the points of views based in reality that have been long silenced by the establishment — values that resonate with the majority of working people, rather than those of the folks selling it to us. And not just to create or romanticise these values on behalf of the ‘low income’ census statistics — but to empower and create awareness within, and amongst communities — of the effectiveness of class consciousness and direct, collective action towards social change.

Increasingly, I’m coming to realise that to do this, images are not enough. Like individual acts of dissidence — on their own they may educate, encourage or enrage — but unless they are linked with some aspect of wider struggle, they become obsolete.

So, the direction a socially concerned design practitioner could take becomes two-fold — cultural production that questions the dominant values and constructions of today, which in doing so, explores alternate possibilities — without alienating people and without their ideas becoming watered down in the process. Also, a practice that could deconstruct the privilege of the

I never wanted to be a graphic designer. At least not in the traditional sense — the faceless middle-man servicing the corporate body was something I didn’t want to be. And when that’s often the only direction encouraged within the design world, it becomes increasingly hard to find and explore alternatives, let alone sustainable ones.

Inspired by one part ego, one part punk, and a good dash of ‘politics’, my alternative to the overly commercial realm of graphic design ended up as ‘Garage Collective’ — the banner under which my design and screenprint output has come to be known. Over time, Garage Collective has had a number of projects and sometimes confused directions — from local and international band’s gigposters, grassroots political campaigns, features in a few exhibitions (as well as one of my own), numerous zines and writings (This Is Not A Manifesto — Towards An Alternative Design Practice), and my own personal screenprinted projects. It’s these personal projects that have encouraged me to re-think, not only my own practice, but Garage Collective itself — it’s current position and the possibility of other creative directions. The following text is the manifestation of that re-think.

Garage Collective was set up in my garage in Christchurch, New Zealand around August 2007, with the explicit intention of avoiding the design industry and all that it encompasses — advertising, profitability, marketing, consumption, and ultimately, the advancement of our current exploitative and illogical system — Capitalism. By setting myself up independent of this mainstream conception of design, I have been lucky enough to participate in projects which, in my mind, have been far more worthwhile and productive than encouraging profit margins, consumer culture, and an elitist design minority.

Whole-heartedly subscribing to the punk ethic of Do-It-Yourself,

my dad and I built most of the equipment required to screenprint from scratch — a lightbox for exposure, the vacuum table — both crafted from some basic internet plans and a few trips to the hardware store. And while I knew I wanted to focus on the medium of screenprinting as a way of merging my interest in punk and design into screenprinted gigposters — my knowledge of screenprinting was basic at best. The best way to learn is by doing, so my skills as a rather lo-fi printer grew as I dived head first into production.

For me, gigposters are chronologically linked to the community notice board of old, as well as those decadent Victorian broadsheets packed with oxymoron's, chaotic type, and more often than not, a slightly warped sense of humour. They both spoke to a particular audience, and in the case of gigposters, not much has changed. The visual language of a subculture — gigposters often convey, through particular imagery and aesthetics, a set of codes meant only for those in the know. This idea of communication between like-minded individuals, bands, and other screenprinters and poster makers inspired the name 'Garage Collective'. Although not a literal collective, for me it has come to mean a loose gathering of shared ideas and ideals, of both the people I've physically worked with, as well as the people I get to share my visual interpretations with on the street and at the shows.

So, the initial phase of my practice was to design and print unique, hand crafted posters from my garage — gigposters, political posters — anything that was not intended to profit off the backs of others. No design firms, no major label bands, no advertising. To exist in this fashion, completely independent of the design industry, was in my mind, a political feat.

For close to two years this idea of independent and alternative printing has sustained Garage Collective and my individual practice. However, a growing interest in community and workplace struggle, and the ideas of non-hierarchical, direct action politics has meant I'm reevaluating the direction of Garage Collective. My interest in band posters has dwindled, towards a greater interest in the role cultural and graphic work can play in political agitation and radical, collective struggle for social justice — as well as a more tangible political stance for Garage Collective, rather than simply existing independent of the design industry. This hasn't been a sudden shift in thinking — political and social causes were always on the agenda, as well as a visual sensibility that is (hopefully) more though-provoking than your typical band poster. Rather, it is a shift in

priorities, with emphasis on the political winning out over the musical.

'Political' is a rather ambiguous term, one that can cover the spectrum of elections, political parties and parliamentary democracy to stencil art and sidewalk graffiti. The definition of political work I lean towards is what some may consider a-political — that is to say, completely devoid of parliamentary politics, with an emphasis on community building, self-determination, empowerment, economic emancipation, and most importantly, class awareness via cultural production. Sound like a mouthful? That's because it is, and comes with a number of issues that, as a creative person educated on the unfailable idea of artistic individualism and a bourgeois concept of 'insistence on form and knowledge of form' — can be rather problematic.

Subcultures, like elitism, are often extremely exclusive. Unfortunately, large aspects of design, art, and even activism can be rightly regarded as exclusive in their own ways — the uber fashionable, money-driven design culture, or the alienating, dogmatic 'know-it-all' vanguardism of activism. Thus a problem arises — how do I, as an individual 'designer' interested in making socially concerned work, do so in a way that is inclusive, worthwhile, and ultimately empowering — not just for myself, but for those around me? When society places such an emphasis on the 'individual genius' of the artist and their final output, rather than their social commitment, it makes it rather hard for those completely disenfranchised by this understanding of artistic work to construct alternatives, completely free of the established connotations.

More than ever, I am finding that I am no longer concerned with the visual language of subcultures, whether it be musical (gigposters) or cultural (design) — but with building sustainable relationships and decentralised, social organisation with communities and everyday working people — in short, a wider and more inclusive demographic. Again, problems arise — what gives me the right, as a somewhat privileged, white, 'middle class', university educated designer, to seek out and interpret those communities through my creative practice? Is this kind of cultural approach even valid when compared with the various forms of drudgery forced upon us from every angle — that being social, economic, and political? Would my energies be better served somewhere else, in an entirely different form? These realities of everyday, working life strongly influence my thinking — whether it be artistic or not — and figure with a lot more clarity than they had previously.