

Politicians, journalists and pundits use language. Graphic designers use visual language.

Drawing on two realms, designers unite visual and verbal content in compelling communication. In a divisive era, when words alone are not enough, can design thinking help unite citizens on the issues?

Graphic design causes us to take notice. In an information-saturated society, messages compete for our attention. Design is the competitive advantage. Traditionally, the power of design belongs to those who commission it. Its influence is based more on the agenda of those who employ design than on the worthiness of the message it conveys. Every designed message doing its job pulls us from other messages less well designed. Design of inconsequential content diverts the public's attention from what is of consequence.

The 2008 campaign of Barack Obama brought graphic design to presidential politics. This was the first campaign to employ a sophisticated professional strategy to create a candidate's visual identity. The Obama logo and typographic framework represented a degree of sophistication associated more

with corporate and institutional branding; it was unprecedented for political office. Just as influential, an unofficial poster by a graphic designer fused the idealized image of the candidate with what was then a slogan. Through design Obama and hope became one and the same.

Most of the profession's modern history has meant adding value to content supplied by a client. The vast majority of design is applied in corporate or institutional contexts. Political campaigns have not been in the picture. Design is typically engaged with enhancing the message provided to exploit its impact on a mass audience. Graphic designers have forbears with a variety of skills, but to become a profession, design narrowed to a specialization. It is a process of mediation — between a client and an audience; between a message and the technological developments of mass dissemination; between content and human consumption. Design adds legitimacy to messages by translating them into recognizable media formats while humanizing the message itself.

content — became that much shorter. Dematerializing typography from the densest of metals, paradoxically, gave it more weight in the design process. While today one would not say “more minds have been changed through lead type than lead bullets,” typography — now in the hands of designers — is nevertheless the primary medium of information and persuasion.

Visual art is the freest form of free expression. Graphic design occurs at the intersection of visual and verbal where even the verbal is expressed visually. When thoughtful designers are authors the result is expression on steroids.

We the Designers is a national exhibition of self-authored graphic design. Through the process of design thinking participants

inform and persuade about issues facing the Obama administration. Sometimes the verbal component is dominant; sometimes it is subordinate; and sometimes it is subsumed in symbolic imagery. Some designers tackle issues that transcend any single administration but which affect this president. Others address this administration’s policies. Still others focus on the president himself. All have one thing in common. They are the visual/verbal voice of civic engagement by we (the designers) who made them.

Designers so engaged have become known as citizen designers. Foremost among this group was Sylvia Harris. This exhibition is dedicated to her memory.

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REFRAMING
POLITICAL ISSUES
IN THE
OBAMA ERA

WE THE DESIGNERS

Boston
Northeastern University
September 29 – December 15

2011

Washington
National Press Club
January 16 – February 10

2012

St. Paul
Goldstein Museum of Design
September 28 – December 30

2012