

# SOCIAL MOVEMENT CULTURES: AN INTRODUCTION

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What you hold in your hands is a visual history of social movements from the 1960s to the late 2000s. The posters, flyers, photographs, and other ephemera in these pages were created by participants in the movements represented, often at the height of struggles and mass mobilizations. We've collected this material, first in an exhibition, and now as a book, in order to create a large-scale overview—the beginnings of a map—which illustrates how people have organized across the globe for liberation and equality. Each of these movements is one of thousands of points on this map. Even though there is not sufficient space here for an in-depth analysis of any one grouping, we felt it was more important to err on the side of breadth. We have visited many archives and collections, and with each visit, this project grew. We wanted to take these materials out of the drawers, closets, and basements and bring them back into the light. *Signs of Change* spotlights just some of the evidence of the decades of struggle, effort, and creative expression produced by movements organized to build a new and better world.

We are indebted to the committed people who have built the important collections at the Center for the Study of Political Graphics and the International Institute of Social History, where we began our research. We also depended on a vast network of individuals who have kept a few posters rolled up under their bed, or could tell us who had a copy of a protest video. The materials were borrowed from over eighty lenders. Many of the videos included in the exhibition hadn't been shown since the time of their production (see page 158 for a list of film and video that screened in *Signs of Change*). Our research was not just about movements and the culture they produce, but also about what happens to the works when a movement demobilizes. Who picks up the placards after the protest? Who stores them and catalogs them? Who makes them public again for research and understanding?

*Signs of Change* is intended to do many things: make visible histories of social movements, teach us about collective cultural production, challenge us to think more deeply about communicative activity in the public sphere, ask us what the role of aesthetics can be in the context of social struggles, and reveal innovative grassroots visions for new societies. There were over one thousand pieces in the *Signs of Change* exhibition, and there

are over four hundred images in this book. They are from different movements spanning close to fifty years and across the globe, but presenting them together allows us to see the resonances and dissonances among struggles. We can catch a glimpse of some of the commonalities across the national, ethnic, and linguistic borders that many of the movements attempted to break down. Several key ideas related to the histories and objects represented here emerged as we organized this project: the importance of the historical and social context of each piece and movement, social movement as autonomous activity, the generation of alternative social formations, prefigurative politics, using and inventing new technologies, and the development of new conceptions of the artist.

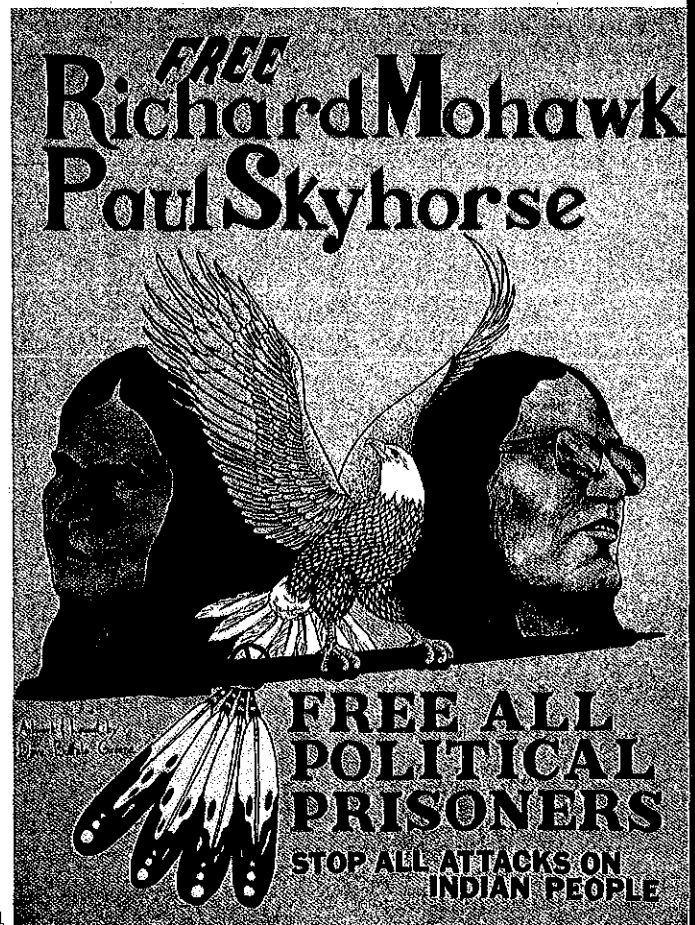
## HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

All art develops within a social and historical context, but the work we are examining was created consciously as a means to participate in a struggle to change that context. The more we unearthed and studied these materials, the more important it became to distinguish between popular conceptions of political art and what we are calling social movement culture. Generally, the work collected in *Signs of Change* does not merely have political content, nor was it originally created for a gallery, or by an individual artist reflecting on their world. Rather, it was born from a context in which large numbers of people mobilized to achieve transformative goals. The individuals who comprise these struggles generate culture from a need to express, represent, and propose alternative ways of existing, both within the movements and to society at large.

Understanding the social and historical context of art and media production is important to comprehending both the works themselves and their relationship to the world in

which we live now. Some of the images and graphics in this book may look familiar because artists and advertisers have used them over the years (the bold silk-screened graphics of the 1968 student and worker revolt in France have been particularly popular, see pages 40–41). Rarely in those contexts is there an acknowledgment of the images' origins or an explanation of the movements that produced them. While researching, we have been shocked by how little we actually know about the struggles from which many iconic images emerged. At the same time, we discovered so many struggles we knew nothing about. The artifacts collected here are evidence of the existence of movements and deserve attention. Although we both were familiar with the American Indian Movement (AIM), posters produced by AIM and its supporters introduced us to many Native political prisoners we had previously never heard of (fig. 11). In this way, *Signs of Change* contextualizes familiar images and at the same time reveals little-known or under-represented histories.

With this in mind, we hope this book will act as a pedagogical tool. Hundreds of students have toured the exhibition. The posters





and videos introduced many viewers to certain histories and political ideas for the first time. For example, we were surprised by how few of the high school or undergraduate college students had been taught about apartheid in South Africa (see pages 88–91). We hope that students of all ages and educators of all types will use this book as a starting point for understanding social movements and their aesthetic histories.

#### AUTONOMOUS ACTIVITY

This book focuses almost exclusively on “autonomous social movements.” These are movements that emerge from the 1960s onward that define themselves as separate from traditional modes of political organizing, such as social democratic electoral politics, authoritarian communist and socialist parties, or top-down and bureaucratic union structures. None of the work here was produced by governments, but instead was created by grassroots and bottom-up social organizations, collectives, and individuals. Although we were producing the exhibition during the US presidential election season of 2008, we decided not to include material related to voting and electoral politics. Voting is only one way to politically participate in a society; we wanted to show thousands of other ways that people have engaged since the 1960s.

Many of the movements and cultural expressions explored in *Signs of Change* have an overarching critique of several aspects of society; this complex critique is “radical” in the sense of attempting to get to the root of oppression and our current system of gross inequality. These movements do not simply want to replace one ineffective ruler with another, or one version of capitalism with a less virulent one, but to change the entire system, to build a completely different world and completely different way of life.

#### ALTERNATIVE SOCIAL FORMATIONS

The cultures that movements produce are created through a complex interplay amongst available resources, forms of expression and organization, and aesthetic decisions. In contrast to culture produced, preserved, and celebrated in the mainstream art world, many of the

posters, graphics, and videos we found were produced through collective processes with little concern for authorship. In addition, movement art production is often a synthesis of process and product, where the form of production must manifest the anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist values of the movements; this is sometimes referred to as prefigurative politics. Feminist media collectives are good examples of enacting or prefiguring political values. The Chicago Women’s Graphics Collective’s process of poster production involved input from all members. This process is documented in the video the members produced entitled *It Can Be Done* (1973). This approach can be seen as a means to a means as well as a means to an end; the creative process of production contributes to the development of new social relationships among those involved, all the while potentially creating new cultural forms.

The culture of movements is not solely posters, media, or graphics. Its resonance can be found in the social formations movements create, such as public protests, demonstrations, encampments, affinity groups, collectives, and solidarities. At shorter-term demonstrations and longer-term encampments (tent villages set up at contestational sites, such as military bases, airports, or borders), concerns with many aspects of life, including food preparation, housing, group decision making, and visual production are influenced by egalitarian movement values. This can be seen particularly well in the peace encampments of the women’s movement, such as the Greenham Common and Seneca Women’s Peace Encampment (see page 127), that influenced the Climate and No Borders Camps (see pages 138–139, 156–157) of today.

12. United Democratic Front (artist unknown), *Forward to Freedom*, offset lithograph poster, 1984, South Africa.

Originally designed and printed in South Africa, this poster was reprinted in the United States as a solidarity gesture with the anti-apartheid movement. In the 1980s, many South African posters were reprinted in the US and Europe to raise awareness and money for the movement.

13. Hong Sung Dam, *Gwangju Uprising*, wood block print, c. 1983–1989, South Korea.

14. Still from *Women’s Lib Demonstration I* (1970, 05:00 minutes, Videofreex), USA.



## UTOPIAN PROPOSALS

In order for groups of people to consciously change the world, part of their struggle must be envisioning and experimenting with what this new and changed world will look like. By imagining and practicing what could be, social movements often develop ideas and innovations about society that transform the status quo. Movement experiments and proposals, which at the time of their inception might seem absurd to outside observers, are often later adopted, in part or whole, and eventually are thought of as common sense. Early environmental activists who pushed for transforming our relationship to the earth's resources are now seeing many of their ideas widely practiced, including the growth of organic food production, recycling, and eliminating toxins in the environment. The women's liberation movement fundamentally transformed the status quo understanding of women's roles in society. Participants in the movement proposed, prefigured, and enacted different gender relations and roles, and now many related aspects of society have changed.

Unfortunately the more anti-capitalist aspects of these ideas are often lost in their shift from margin to center. In the mid-1960s in Amsterdam, Provo developed a series of proposals for better urban planning and existence, including the White Bicycle Plan (see pages 94-95), which proposed that thousands of free and unlocked white bikes be left around the city for everyone to share.<sup>1</sup> Today this strategy for convenient and accessible urban transportation has been adopted in a variety of municipalities by for-profit companies that rent fleets of tourist bicycles, which can only be released from their parking spaces by credit card. After Provo

dissolved in 1967, the Kabouters (literally translated as the Gnomes, or Gnome Party) formed; one of the initiatives they developed and put forward was a Green City Plan. They proposed to sink the roads and mandate gardens be created on top of all cars so that pedestrians walking city streets would only see green space passing them by.<sup>2</sup> The idea of the green city is now a mainstream concept, even if some of the more creative, anti-capitalist, and visionary ideas of earlier social movements that influenced today's green urban planning have been ignored.

## COMMUNICATION AND TECHNOLOGY

All social struggles have had important relationships to the media of their day, from the newspapers of the radical labor movements at the turn of the twentieth century to today's use of the internet and mobile technologies. Mass communication technologies are important to movements for many reasons, including internal dialogue, getting movement messages out to wider audiences, and for alternative expressions. Social movement relationships to communication technologies and distribution systems can be parasitic, antagonistic, and/or productive, and most often are a combination of these strategies.

In the early 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement in the United States harnessed the power of the relatively new medium of television. Organizations like the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) made use of media spectacles by consciously organizing non-violent civil disobedience actions in locations with a media presence.<sup>3</sup> The mass distribution of images on

television and in print media of brutal confrontations by police acting out racist state and personal agendas helped the movement gain empathy and support throughout the world. These activists inserted themselves into, and took advantage of, the existing communication structures. As movements in the late 1960s attempted to build on the success of the Civil Rights Movement, they developed an increasing consciousness and critique of the uni-directionality of mainstream media. Movements could *become* the news story, but they could never *write* the news story. The decentralization of media, and the desire to learn the tools of media production, became a movement demand. Controlling a struggle's image and message became increasingly important and the relationship to media shifted to one of production, with movement actors making their own media and experimenting with their own distribution systems (fig. 14).

Other media strategies have included occupations of TV and radio stations by workers, students, and other groups in order to control the means of production and distribution of the story of a movement. During the Gwangju popular uprising in South Korea in 1980, participants occupied and attempted to use the government-controlled television station, but once they realized they couldn't figure out how to broadcast, the relationship quickly shifted from being parasitic to being antagonistic, and they burnt the station to the ground (fig. 13).<sup>4</sup> During the Oaxaca teachers' strike in 2006, participants in the movement occupied the local TV station and successfully broadcast from it. In addition, they also occupied radio stations and set up their own. This story is documented in

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the movie *Un Poquito de Tanta Verdad/A Little Bit of So Much Truth* (fig. 16) which screened in *Signs of Change*.

Embodying a different form of media intervention, the French network Stop Pub organized groups of people to actively resist the increasing encroachment of corporate advertisements into daily life. In one such action in 2003, they armed multiple teams of activists with spray-paint, markers, stickers, rollers, and house paint, which they used to destroy hundreds of the advertisements in the Paris subway system in one night (see page 135).<sup>5</sup>

During the counter-globalization movement in the late 1990s, activists

developed Indymedia (fig. 15), a public web interface where anyone could publish public reports. Using what they call a "democratic open-publishing system," Indymedia set off an explosion of citizen journalists and commentators, who often were reporting on the ground from inside the movements.<sup>6</sup> This predates the ubiquity of "Web 2.0" and what we now call "user-generated content." Even prior to this, in 1994, when the internet had only just begun to see widespread use, a group of indigenous campesinos and revolutionaries in rural Chiapas, Mexico, calling themselves the Zapatistas, began using the Internet to raise international awareness and solidarity with

their movement. Some refer to the Zapatistas as the first post-modern social movement, where rural peasants use high tech communications systems for the instantaneous and global distribution of their ideas. The Zapatistas are an example of how movement actors are often quick to adopt new technologies and use them in ways that were perhaps not intended.

#### NEW SUBJECTS/NEW ARTISTS

Participation in the social movements we are examining produces new subjects, people who are capable of enacting history rather than simply having history happen to them. Part of becoming an agent of change develops from the sharing of skills among movement participants, which, in the case of art and media skills, gives expression to voices that may not have been public before. Out of both desire and necessity, people who previously did not consider themselves media or art producers emerge from struggles as artists, designers, and video makers—as well as organizers, communications specialists, public speakers, caretakers, carpenters, group facilitators, electricians, and dozens of other new identities. This process challenges the common notion of the individual artistic genius and creates more flexible definitions of who is or can be an artist.

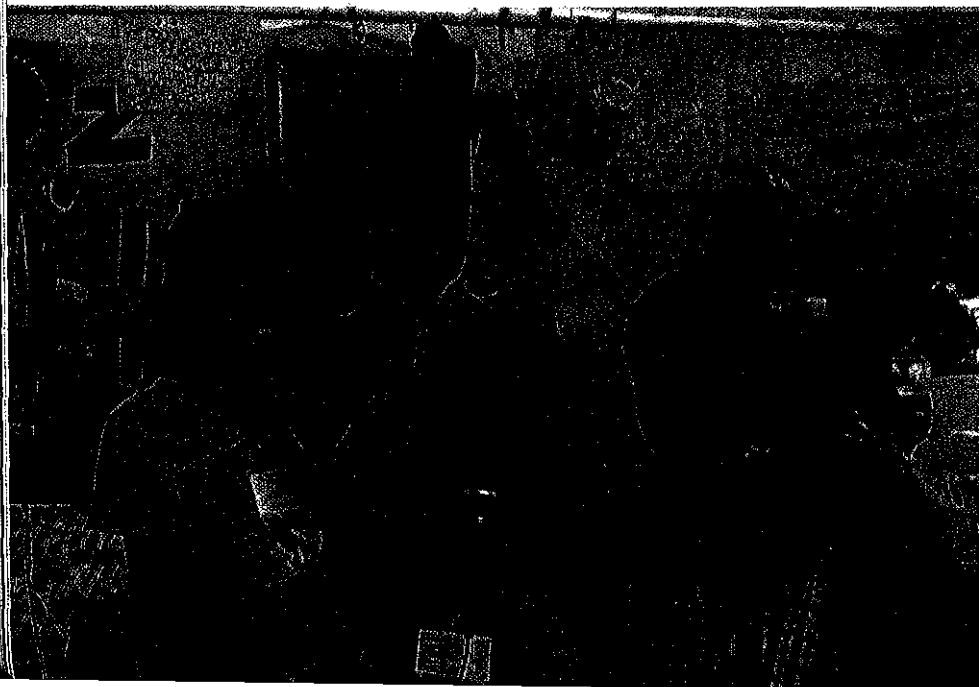
*Signs of Change* is flush with examples of these new movement artists, from the women's liberation movement to the anti-apartheid struggle to the resistance to the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile. The Cape Town Community Arts Project and many similar popular silkscreen workshops in South Africa taught people with little or no art experience to produce effective posters for their unions, student groups, and women's organizations. Media and video access programs, which teach anyone who wants to learn how to make their own media, have sprung up in many movements, from Women's Liberation in the 1970s to the Zapatistas in the 1990s. In Chile during the dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s, women with no formal art training began making *arpilleras* (see pages 82–83). *Arpilleras* are small hand-sewn pictorial pieces of fabric on which women represented the brutality of the Pinochet regime. Countering the repression of public expression in Chile during these years, a network supported by the left-wing Catholic Church set up craft workshops and then distributed these *arpilleras* internationally.<sup>7</sup> The movements we are looking at transform what it means to be an artist, as well as what participation in civil society can be.

#### ARCHIVES: OUR COLLECTIVE HISTORY BELONGS IN THE COMMONS

What happens or should happen to all of the cultural material produced by social movements? There is no question that the majority of the material is created for specific uses, including education, communication, political expression, and/or creating visual spectacles at protests, rallies, and marches. Most of it is destroyed, but some of it ends up in the personal collections of participants and makers, other pieces are kept by



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people who want a reminder of history or are interested in aesthetics and design. Much of what is saved eventually ends up in archives, ranging from large personal collections, such as Michael Rossman's All of Us or None Archive in Berkeley, California, to institutions that developed directly out of specific social movements, such as the Lesbian Herstory Archive in Brooklyn, to giant art institutions and university libraries' special collections.<sup>8</sup>

Although often made anonymously or by groups working collectively, and created to be used openly, publicly, and for free, much of this work ends up being controlled by institutions, which have the resources to store it, but not the means or the will to make it truly public. The problem of storage and preservation creates complex issues in relation to copyright and ownership. Additionally, many institutions are not sympathetic either politically or aesthetically to the social movement material they own. One archive we visited at a major art museum contained a Post-It note in one of the drawers holding social movement posters, which said, "Not cool enough to catalog." Institutions like this one may have larger budgets than independent spaces, but the work remains uncataloged, sitting stagnant in flat files, because no one knows it's there.

Meanwhile, there are places like the Center for the Study of Political Graphics (CSPG) in Los Angeles, which exclusively focuses on the collecting and preserving of political posters and survives with minimal institutional funding. Not affiliated with any major educational or art institutions, CSPG has been able to collect over sixty thousand posters, the largest collection of post-war political posters in the US. With limited resources, they have done an impressive amount of work, cataloging fifteen thousand of these posters and preparing a searchable database they hope to make public.

We firmly believe the images and information collected in this book belong in the commons, where we can all share, value, and attempt to use them to understand our past. With the advancements in web technologies and digital data storage, we are at a point where we can envision a massive free and public archive, a wiki of social movement culture. But that is another project!

## CONCLUSION

Moments of social upheaval generate large-scale aesthetic and creative outpourings. In location after location, intense eruptions of art production can be seen. In a short six weeks in France in 1968 during the student and worker revolt, the walls of Paris and other cities were covered with hundreds of thousands of slogans and posters. One group alone, the Atelier Populaire at Beaux-Arts, produced over 350 different poster designs and printed up to two thousand copies of each poster.<sup>9</sup> In Portugal during the brief three years of the Revolution of the Carnations, thousands of walls were painted with murals expressing the political beliefs and desires of the people making them (see pages 84–85). When portable video was first available in the late 1960s and early 1970s, video collectives formed and began documenting their actions and the events around them, producing thousands of tapes. In recent years, with wider access to the tools of digital media making, the amount of media and art produced by movement actors is overwhelming.

There is an incredible diversity and richness in the cultural material produced by social movements. We found very little overlap among the archives and personal collections we visited, and many of these contained thousands of items. Choosing an extremely small sampling of this material might have made for a very tight and easy to digest exhibit and catalog, but we feel that the sheer volume of work produced is as important as any one particular piece. We hope to have documented not just individuals creating things, but networks of people in connection to each other, merging their collective ideas and skills toward something exciting and new. In many ways *Signs of Change* is itself a conceptual project, attempting to convey the dizzying array of what movements produce.

That said, we are not suggesting that all of these materials are equally effective or even capable of succeeding at accomplishing the changes their creators aspired to. Although some important changes have occurred due to the work of these movements, injustice remains, including the grossly unequal distribution of wealth. As people engaged with questions of culture and social change, we want to know what the successes and failures of this type of work have been, so that this history can inform the work we do now. We turned a spotlight on social movement culture, and now we can collectively begin a more in-depth analysis. We hope this next step will be taken by many. Each piece included here, as well as each movement, deserves more attention: politically, historically, and aesthetically—let us continue the journey together.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Richard Kempton, *Provo: Amsterdam's Anarchist Revolt* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2007), 71.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 132–135.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Kasher, *The Civil Rights Movement: A Photographic History, 1954–1968* (New York: Abbeville Press, 2006), <http://www.stevenkasher.com/html/exhibinfo.asp?exnum=297> (October 4, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Todd Tevares, "Kwangju Against the State 1980," Paper delivered at Renewing the Anarchist Tradition Conference (Montpelier, VT), November 9, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Lothar Blissant, *Do-It-Yourself Geopolitics: Cartographies of Art in the World*, <http://www.journalofaestheticsandprotest.org/webonly/Holmes.htm> (May 20, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Indymedia, "About Indymedia," <http://www.indymedia.org/en/static/about.shtml> (May 25, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Jacqueline Adams, "Art in Social Movements: Shantytown Women's Protest in Pinochet's Chile," *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (March 2002): 29.

<sup>8</sup> We visited Michael Rossman (1939–2008) at his collection and borrowed several pieces from it for the exhibit. Sadly, he passed away before the show opened.

<sup>9</sup> Rebecca DeRoo, *The Museum Establishment and Contemporary Art: the Politics of Artistic Display in France After 1968* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 48.

<sup>15</sup> Indymedia (artist unknown), Indymedia, sticker, 2000, USA.  
<sup>16</sup> Promotional image from the video *Un Poquito de Tanta Verdad/A Little Bit of So Much Truth* (2007, 93:00 minutes, produced by Corrugated Films in collaboration with Mat de Ojo), Mexico and USA, photograph by Pablo Specas Castells.  
<sup>17</sup> Lincoln Cushing, Michael Rossman (RIP, 1940–2008) sharing his All of Us or None Poster Archive, photographic documentation, 2002, USA.

