

The Rapidograph Is Mightier Than the Sword

By Karen Green

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Or maybe it's the brush that's mightier. Or the stencil and the spray-paint can.

As I find myself glued to news of the developments in Cairo (did you know that I spent a fair amount of time in Egypt? I'm the librarian for an [archaeological excavation](#) there, and I've gotten to go work on the dig four times in the past seven years), I'm thinking even more than usual about the connections between political activism and visual culture. There have been some great signs from Cairo that convey the people's feelings in cogent images:

Last month, at the end of my column, I mentioned the terrific retrospective show, "Graphic Radicals," at the [Exit Art](#) gallery in New York City. If you're reading this on Friday, February 4th, 2011, then you've got two last chances--today! tomorrow!--to go check it out. I've been three times so far, and am expecting to go for a fourth.

"Graphic Radicals" presents a massive collection of original art from the magazine [World War 3 Illustrated](#), begun 30 years ago by school-friends [Peter Kuper](#) and [Seth Tobocman](#), with fellow artist Christoph Kohlhofer. In 1979, the three watched the news from Iran—the Islamic Revolution, and the fifty-plus hostages held in the American embassy—and expected World War III would be coming along any moment now. And, much like [Tom Lehrer felt regarding WW3 war songs](#), Kuper and Tobocman and Kohlhofer realized that, if any good war cartoons were going to come out of WW3, they'd better start making them now. So, as the Iranian hostage crisis wound on, and Ronald Reagan was elected, the three produced their first issue, with an assist from [Ben Katchor](#).

If you've been following these columns for a while, you know I've written about political cartooning quite a bit. As I've mentioned, my own earliest comics awakening was fueled by the political history I learned from [old New Yorker cartoons](#); I've examined [war satires](#); I've recorded the political nuance that slipped into an otherwise innocuous [daily newspaper strip](#); and I've reminisced about the time-capsule of AIDS activism and awareness represented by [Strip AIDS USA](#). I've yet to get into my 35-year love affair with *Doonesbury*: the only care-package I received from my parents on my first over-seas trip as a [17-year-old kibbutznik](#) in 1976 was a box of *Doonesbury* paperback anthologies, and to this day the first thing I do upon awakening is check the day's strip.

But I am mostly a political observer. Kuper and Tobocman, and the collective of cartoonists and artists they gathered to produce forty-one issues in thirty years, are both observers and actors. And *World War 3 Illustrated*, as it marched from 1980 onwards, demonstrates, graphically, that

the global is local, the local is global, and that what harms any member of the Family of Man harms us all. At its core, it demonstrates that, in Tobocman's pithy credo, "You don't have to fuck people over to survive."

A timeline down the center of the Exit Art gallery provides a 30-year history of political action. *World War 3* artists were involved with anti-nuke demonstrations in 1982; with protests against US involvement in Central America in 1983; with street art against police brutality in 1984. The timeline juxtaposes the *WW3* artists' involvement with those newsworthy events that helped galvanize them: the murder of [Michael Stewart](#), a Lower East Side graffiti artist, by police in '83; the fatal shooting of grandmother [Eleanor Bumpurs](#) by police trying to evict her in '84; the bombing of an entire block in Philadelphia by police using C-4 to destroy black activist group [MOVE](#)'s headquarters in '85; the city's bulldozing of [Adam Purple](#)'s beautiful community Garden of Eden in '86; the squatters movement that saw modern "homesteaders" trying to make a life in the city's abandoned buildings; the fight against apartheid; the [Tomkins Square Park riots](#); the Iran-Contra scandal; the AIDS epidemic; the [Rodney King](#) incident and the ensuing riots; September 11th; the invasion of Iraq; Hurricane Katrina; the foreclosures crisis.

Year after year, a revolving masthead of creators—the founders, along with [Eric Drooker](#), Joshua Whalen, [Steve Brodner](#), [Sandy Jimenez](#), Sabrina Jones, Chris Cardinale, Mac McGill, Kevin Pyle, [Sue Coe](#), James Romberger ([whom I've written about before](#)) and his wife Marguerite Van Cook, and countless others—would contribute to and edit issue after issue. Sometimes these artists would branch off into side projects, which would then show up excerpted in *WW3*'s pages, whether Tobocman's *War in the Neighborhood*, a history-cum-explanation of the 1980s housing shortage in New York City and birth of the squatters' rights movement; or Kuper's sketchbook diary of the two years he spent with his family in Oaxaca, Mexico, a sojourn that turned out to coincide with a highly-charged teachers' strike; or Nicole Schulman's collaboration, along with a host of *WW3* artists, on a history of the [International Workers of the World](#) union, the "[Wobblies](#)."

But here I am going on and on about *WW3* and its artists' social activism. I can't deny that I admire it. Some may call them anarchists but, as a *WW3* artist known as Seth put it: "Everyone is an anarchist when his own ass is on the line." The legitimacy with which any individual imbues a revolutionary movement is entirely dependent on where that individual's own interests lay, as I'm sure the Tea Partiers would agree. But what is the connection to academia?

That's a straw man of a query at best, because this really isn't even something I need to defend. Columbia University's own School of Journalism, founded in 1912 with a bequest left by newspaper mogul Joseph Pulitzer, has been awarding [Pulitzer Prizes](#) since 1917, and added the category of "[Editorial Cartooning](#)" in 1922. Political art and caricature has a noble lineage, stretching back at the very least to the great 18th-century artist and printmaker, [William Hogarth](#), through 19th-century masters of the form like [James Gillray](#) (for whom Princeton has created a marvelous [digital collection](#)) and [George Cruikshank](#) in England, and the great [Honoré Daumier](#) in France, whom Kuper has mentioned as a powerful inspiration.

Daumier wielded a pen warmed up in Hell, as [Mark Twain](#) would say, against nearly all the institutions of French society, especially its government, and most especially its king, [Louis](#)

[Philippe I. Daumier](#) repeatedly depicted him as a [giant pear](#) (inspired by an initial [pearification](#) by [Charles Philipon](#), which had landed that artist in jail and would do the same for his protégé. Daumier would go even further, and combine his pear-headed king with Rabelais' insatiable giant, [Gargantua](#), growing fat off the harvest of his people while they starved). The flabby pear-shape of the king would spread to represent all manner of lazy, corrupt politicians, as in the above image from 1834, "The Legislative Paunch," which Harry Katz has described as "a classic political group portrait: arrogance, indifference, venality, corruption, and corpulence." Daumier's corpulent senators may perhaps have been an influence on Austrian-American artist [Joseph Keppler](#)'s moneybag trusts, depicted in a cartoon for *Puck* in 1889, looming over our legislators as bosses of a Senate of, for, and by monopolies.

At times, the elements of news media, politics, and art meet in a kind of harmonic convergence, as in Leon Barritt's cartoon of newspaper titans Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst, dressed as their rival Yellow Kids, battling for ascendancy in circulation, influence, and, eventually, promulgation of the [Spanish-American War](#). But political cartooning, while it certainly can slide into [propaganda](#) and function to support and perpetuate the institutions in power, in a country that celebrates freedom of the press is as, or more, often adversarial. Sometimes it can move mountains, as did [Thomas Nast's endless lampooning](#) of the sensationally corrupt [William "Boss" Tweed](#) and his Tammany Tigers. As corporations cement their hold on our political process, however, and the public gets more complacent in its materialism, has political art lost the power to sway public opinion? As *WW3*'s editors note in the introduction to a 1989 anthology of their first ten years, "The traditional Left idea of 'organize the workers' doesn't work in America. In America you have to organize the consumers, because they're the ones with the power." And so the *WW3* artists create street art and posters and performance pieces that capture the popular eye; many of their motifs have been made freely available for others to re-purpose in their own political battles.

All of this is worthy of study: the history, and the process. For me, as an historian, though, it is the history that holds the real fascination. As Luc Sante notes in his introduction to *War in the Neighborhood*, the Lower East Side/East Village squatters movements had roots that go deep in New York City history: "The black and Irish inhabitants of [Seneca Village](#), a community of at least 264 people, with three churches, a school, and two graveyards, presumably never thought of themselves as squatters until they were evicted so that the land could be cleared for the future Central Park." As I read that book, and Tobocman's other work, I found myself imagining how it could be used in a course on the history of housing in New York City. I called our [Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation](#), and asked if they offered any such courses; the answer was "no." Surprising to me, but who knows what the future will bring? At least we'll have the material in the library to help give a fully-rounded picture of what went on.

The Tobocman credo I mentioned above, in the eponymous book, comes in the middle of a striking set of images that covers fourteen pages. Accompanied by these bold, stencilled, black-and-white graphics, the poetic captions read:

The world is being ripped
By men who trade in human blood
They have no future

You will never succeed in joining their club
Don't believe what they tell you
Their weapons won't save you
People aren't out to get you!
You don't have to fuck people over to survive
Or yourself
The dog imitates the master
But only eats the leftovers
He has power over another man's life but none over his own
UNITE
We can't lose....there are millions of us.

These sentiments and images capture a moment. It may pass, it may be sustained. Images like these, from other cultures, are the stuff of museum collections—like the Soviet dissident art in Rutgers University's [Zimmerli Museum](#). The moment it captures may inspire us, may repel us, but can always teach us. Watching the horrific developments in Cairo after a full week of peaceful demonstrations, it's not difficult to hear echoes of the familiar protest mantra "The people, united, will never be defeated!" These turning points of history, of society, are around us everywhere: abroad, and in our own backyards. We can watch from a distance, or we can throw ourselves into the fray. The *WW3* artists have done the latter. Soon, the Columbia Libraries will have one of three extant full sets of *World War 3 Illustrated*--so that, at the very least, students here, now and in the future, will be able to remember, and possibly learn from, their fight.

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