"IN THE MIDDLE OF THE WHOLE THING ABOUT GENDER AND RACE": PERSPECTIVES IN GRAPHIC DESIGN ACTIVISM FROM THE PACIFIC

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ABSTRACT

All graphic design, professional or not, can be considered activist in that 'everyone designs who devises courses of action aimed at changing situations into preferred ones.'(Simon, 1981, 129). The difference between activist and mainstream or 'normalised' graphic design resides in the purpose of using design for overt political and social, as opposed to commercial, purposes.

Historical issues in New Zealand concerned with feminist and Maori activism re-emerged in the period of Second-Wave Feminism and what is known as the Maori Renaissance in the 1970s and 1980s. This paper considers the graphic designs concerned with women's liberation, and indigenous rights, created by the left-wing Wellington Media Collective at that time. Using interviews with individual designers, it considers the Collective's role as a service agency for social activism, producing or enabling the production of graphics of awareness, dissent and challenge, and evaluates selected designs as agents in constructing and affecting public attitudes and political change, contextualized within the wider Pacific region. In this way, the diverse forms of the Collective's output can be seen as the result of the everyday and multiple needs of building and maintaining democratic participation in societies, rather than single issue concerns.

MAIN TEXT

All graphic design, professional or not, can be considered activist in that "everyone designs who devises courses of action aimed at changing situations into preferred ones" (Simon 1962, p. 129). While this description by Herbert Simon is itself historical, it is useful as a reminder that all design is an active process, and it is from this process what is commonly and loosely called 'graphic activism' is to be distinguished. If we consider graphic, or visual communication design as a three-part process arising from a need, being embodied in a form, and finally received by an audience (Walker 1989), the designs of graphic activism can be examined for difference from other forms, such as advertisements which activism may parody and subvert. An 'activist' visual communication may or may not necessarily be distinguished by audience, or determined (despite some oppositional visual conventions or clichés) by stylistic aspects of its visual form. The difference between activist and mainstream or 'normalized' graphic design resides then in the purpose of using design for overt political and social, as opposed to commercial, purposes.

Immediately in making such a distinction issues of value arise. As well as the reissued First Things First Manifesto in 2000, recent compilations graphic design writing such as the Looking Closer series (Beirut et al 1997, 1999, 2002) feature articles that suggest graphic activism is accorded high value (McCoy 1996, Levant de Bretteville 1973, Heller 2002, Lasn 1998). Common among the reasons for this is the way it may demonstrate the power of design as an agent of social and political change, and as an antidote to criticisms of design's complicity with the excesses of business and market economies in the global crises of today. Graphic activism is also treated separately to and accorded a more positive value than propaganda design. It is presented as the public conscience of graphic design (McQuiston 1999 and 2004, Heller and Vienne 2003, Glaser and Ilic 2006) and held up as a model of ethical design that can give voice to the powerless. However despite a small increase in geographical, ethnic, racial and gender diversity in 21st century writings on design activism, many of these dialogues have remained situated within a Northern Hemisphere, Western mainstream, the paradigms of the designer and writer as male. Just as commercial design does not give us a full or balanced picture of the activity, neither does this for graphic activism.

This paper considers a local form of graphic activism away from the

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conventional centres and canons, using extensive interviews with the designers to investigate why they have been drawn to activism, how the structures they created supported and extended activist design, and what significance specific local or regional or global issues had in directing or influencing their practice. In part it is offered as an alternative to the model of design centres feeding innovation to dependent peripheries and the conferring of value that adheres to this model, whether these peripheries are defined by practice, geography, size, ethnicity, or gender. In design practice for instance it considers activism beyond a single issue, and modest, ephemeral forms beyond the protest poster as demonstrations of what Carl DiSalvo describes as design contributing "to the construction of publics" that are "broad, inclusive and multiple…increasing societal awareness, and motivating and enabling political action" (DiSalvo 2009, p.48). This also encompasses Gui Bonsieppe's "interpretation of the term 'democracy' in the sense of participation, so that dominated citizens transform themselves into subjects opening a space for self-determination" (Bonsieppe 2006, p. 29). The local thus gains importance and design activism that happens in peripheries, as the result of specific or idiosyncratic situations, can be seen to offer divergent paradigms of what constitutes effective activist design practice.

The two designers featured in this paper were members of the Wellington Media Collective. Situated in the political capital of New Zealand, the Collective was begun in 1978 by twelve political activists, ideologues and idealists, their objective "to spread the skills of printing and allied processes to those progressive groups of people in the community who traditionally have little or no access to these skills" (Wellington Media Collective 1978, p. 1), and to use graphic design in constructing the form of the message for effective visual communication of alternative ideas. As such its strength was that it was both a service agency and an open training and support centre for social activism, perhaps most importantly, teaching to demand the skills of visual communication and the use of technical facilities to assist and empower those without a voice in mainstream commercial media. Following their slogan "we will work with you not for you" (Wellington Media Collective 1978, p. 1) this approach would today be called participatory design. In 1978 that term had not been coined.

The Collective was involved in many notable and successful campaigns, such as that for an end to apartheid in South Africa and a nuclear-free Pacific, and its longevity also sets it apart from many other short-lived activist associations. It ran until 1998, was essentially self-supporting, and in its twenty years was involved in the production of thousands of pieces of graphic design (Cantlon 2008). In New Zealand, apart from election campaigns, the history of graphic activism begins in the oppositional newspapers of indigenous Maori in the 1860s and the campaigns of women's suffrage in the 1880s (achieved in 1893). The inspirations on these productions were diverse and difficult to quantify, but they were international, and ranged from the influence of nationalist Indian newspapers on Maori print in the 19th century, to that of the American Women's Christian Temperance Union for the publicity campaigns of New Zealand suffragists. The quotation by Wellington Media Collective's foundation designer Dave Kent, used for this paper's title describes the intense activity at the Collective situated "in the middle of all that stuff about race and gender" (Kent 2008), that was the result of the postmodern conjunction of second wave feminism and post-colonial renaissance of indigenous rights in New Zealand that began in the 1970s.

Chris McBride worked at the Collective from 1980 to 1987. From Irish settler ancestry he grew up in a family of boys. His initial political engagement came from joining protests against the racially selected New Zealand rugby teams that had reciprocal tours of South Africa at the time, part of growing and widespread protests against apartheid (fig. 1).

Fig. 1, Chris McBride / Halt All Racist Tours   Fig. 2. Chris McBride, Chris Lipscombe,

taken by the hands of the Pakeha), 1980

(HART), Remember Sharpeville, c1981.
Land Rights Now! (The land will be gone if

The Collective was fully involved in the production of fliers, posters, flags and banners for the violent protests that successfully ended the 1981 Tour by the Springboks. Chris had no formal design training and true to the Collective philosophy he learnt the skills and processes of graphic design on the job from designer Dave Kent. The collage aesthetic of his first design (Fig. 2) reminds us much graphic activism, particularly when it is participatory, is not pretty. It also situates the Collective's work in the Pacific. The purpose was to advertise a visit from Aboriginal Rights activist Pat Dobson, and has a combination of images of prominent Maori activists, as well as aboriginal protests.

Chris's activism had earlier been sparked by involvement with a youth Hui (a gathering, meeting or assembly) in 1971, held importantly on a Maori Marae (the complex of buildings around the open area dedicated to greeting and discussion in front of a Maori meeting house). Here the mixed race group was challenged and split by young Maori radicals. For Chris personally this meant taking sides with Maori, and undergoing a crash course in beginning to understand the experiences of the colonised and dispossessed. His subsequent training and work as a teacher, then a government social worker providing services to Maori and Pacific Island youth gave him a strong identification with their experiences and position in society, and he became the main link between such groups and the Collective. As he learnt to create design Chris was motivated by the Collective philosophy of demystifying, and passing on knowledge of effective political communication to those without a voice, teaching the skills of screenprinting and paste-up to groups in workshops so they could create their own activist messages. Many of these works drew on Chris's contacts with movements for indigenous rights and social issues to do with unemployment, which disproportionately affected Maori and Pacific Island youth and arose from his engagement with Work Cooperatives. Work Cooperatives and Trusts offered an alternative, collectivized and self help approach to the problem of unemployment and sought to both find and engage the unemployed in work and learning skills.

In 1979, before coming to Wellington Chris had become a member of Keskidee Aroha, a widely mixed group of youth workers and Work Trust members spanning local and Pacific Island ethnicities, Maori, Pakeha, Nuiean, Tongan and others, responsible for organizing a tour of New Zealand by the group Keskidee. Keskidee were Afro-Caribbean Rastafarians from Brixton, London, who believed in resolving racial conflict, and bringing about political change non-violently, through music, drama and dance. Keskidee Aroha members toured the country with the group over months, organising performances predominantly in rural and tribal areas which had a large influence on the growth of Rastafarianism among Maori. (Fig. 3)
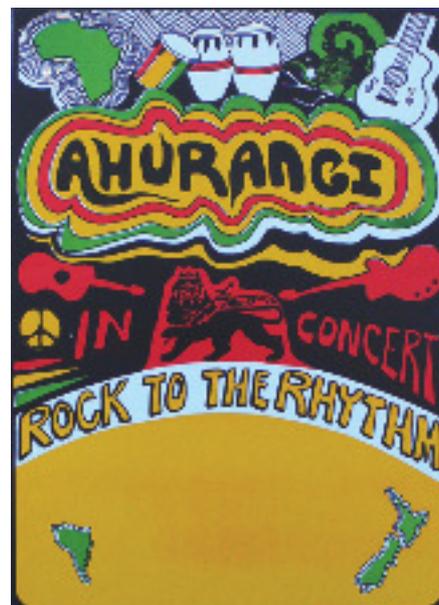

Fig. 3 Hori Chapman, Hemi Ruawhe, Chris McBride, Ahurangi *Hori & Hemi from the Heart*, 1 of 3 posters, n.d.

Overcoming the discomfort of this experience as a white male from a settler culture, being "challenged daily in beliefs, the politics of race and privilege and the challenge to embrace biculturalism and indeed understand the issue of sovereignty" (McBride 2011), Chris found the tour enabled him to forge bonds with the audiences and touring party, and with cultural groups with or for whom he designed posters (Fig. 4). Such works, often produced collectively with the 'clients', fulfilled a model of democratic and participatory design and allowed further access to self determination beyond the designer / client relationship whether an activist work is pro-bono or designer authored.
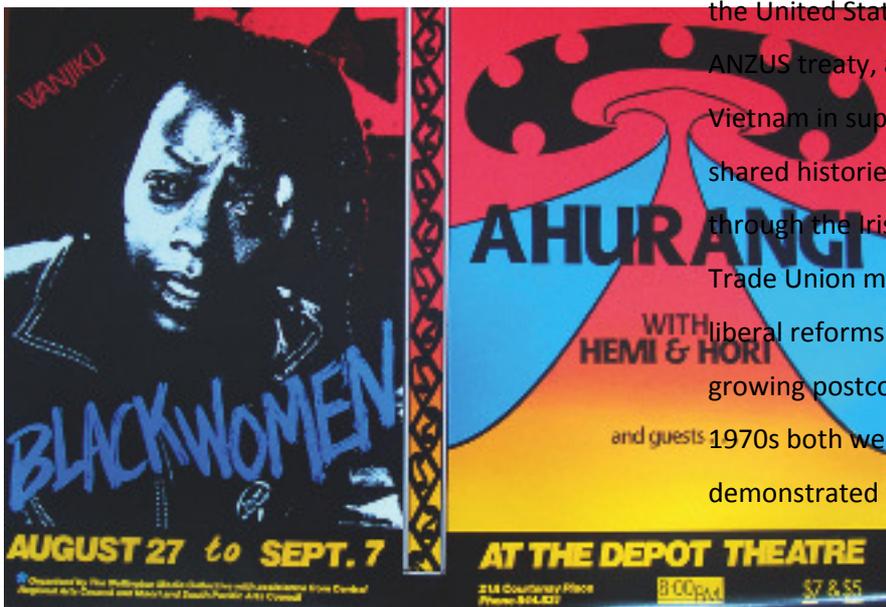

Fig. 4 Chris McBride, *Wanjuku: Black Women*, and *Ahurangi* with Hemi and Hori, posters, c1985

In the complexities of historical graphic activism Chris's sympathies were part of a growing regional consciousness. Bordered by the world's major powers after World War Two, the Pacific had become of global strategic importance.

Increasingly dominated by the United States militarily, in the East were a range of locations where the cold war was being fought by proxy across the lands of former colonies, and to the South widely dispersed archipelagoes of islands which primarily came under the sphere of influence of Australia and New Zealand, the centres of design practice. Increasingly this consciousness was of post-colonial issues of political independence, indigenous rights, and environmental concerns focused on French nuclear testing and the threats from the large Pacific fleets of Nuclear armed and powered vessels of the major powers. Australia and New Zealand were partners in a military alliance with the United States of America, formalized as the ANZUS treaty, and both had sent troops to South Vietnam in support of the US forces. They also shared histories of political activism, in Australia through the Irish influence in the Labour and Trade Union movements, in New Zealand through liberal reforms and state socialism, and in both a growing postcolonial indigenous activism. By the 1970s both were producing graphics that demonstrated this Pacific consciousness.

The key site of graphic work activism in Australia was the Earthworks Poster Collective, later known as the Tin Sheds, at Sydney University, which disbanded into several, often short-lived issue-based groups in 1979. In receipt of government arts funding, the Australian works may be generalized as more design led, fitting more easily into an international aesthetic. The

Wellington Media Collective works, largely self-funded, were characterized by diversity, a comparative graphic understatement and lack of 'revolutionary rhetoric'. This may conversely be attributed to the more radical structure and long-term aims of the group, and their success in creating and serving not just multiple publics, but ones situated in the context of growing regional issues. The Collective's activism had more radical consequences, with New Zealand leaving the ANZUS alliance over the successful campaign to make the South Pacific nuclear free.

By the time Chris left the Collective in 1987, many artists and members of activist groups had honed their skills in the screen-printing workshop, and with more equipment were producing technically and visually sophisticated works (Fig. 5). It was for a National Works Cooperative Hui, held at Parihaka, that Chris believes he made his best work. Parihaka, deeply significant culturally, historically and spiritually, is the site of Maori's first non-violent, passive resistance to punitive European land confiscations in the 1870s, 30 years before Ghandi's campaigns of civil disobedience in South Africa and India.
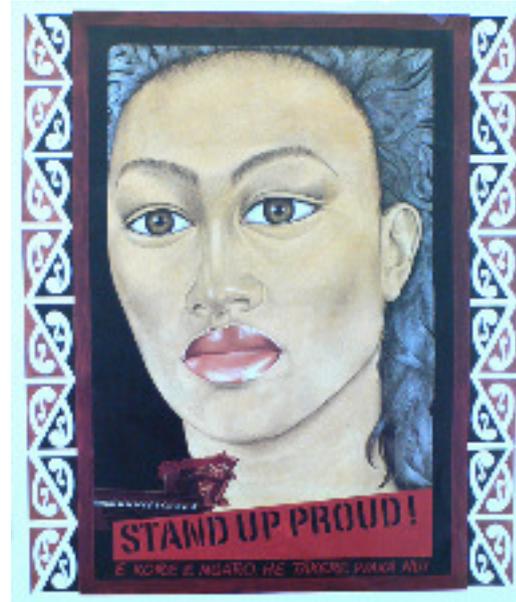

Fig. 5 Robyn Kahukiwa / Haeata / Chris McBride, Stand Up Proud! Poster, 1987

The second designer this paper is concerned with, Sharon Murdoch, grew up in a large rural town that offered her little chance of fulfilling her talents. She describes her background as working class, with a Technical (vocational) College education. Her mother was Maori, and she became aware that women like her settled for a life well below their abilities, while at the same time offering little support for their daughters aiming higher. Her father, a builder, had ambitions for Sharon to be an architect, persuading her school to allow her to be the first girl admitted to all male Technical Drawing classes, and she consequently won the school prize for the subject. With the support of her art teacher she entered the Wellington Polytechnic School of Design, the country's first dedicated tertiary design school, to study graphic design. There she clashed with a lecturer in advertising when she disagreed with

his statement that groceries were bought by housewives. He made her life difficult. However for her successful graduation project, while others were creating commercial designs, he gave her advice that was crucial for her future career: "You know the lesson that you learn here? It doesn't have to apply to a product, you can apply this project to a social issue"(Murdoch, 2011).

As a consequence Sharon's first social design was the logo and posters for the Wellington Rape Crisis Centre (Fig. 6)), where she also had her first encounters with young, radicalized women, clarifying her earlier experiences growing up and becoming aware that the dichotomy of the powerful and powerless in society could fall even more strongly along gender, than along racial, lines. This was powerful work for a 19 year old, and shows I think her attraction to Polish posters of the time, learnt of through *Graphis* magazine, as well as her readings of feminist writings such as Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will*.

Fig. 6 Sharon Murdoch, Rape Crisis logo, 1979

After graduation, while employed in various design positions, Sharon became increasingly aware of political issues, particularly, like Chris, the national Anti-Apartheid campaigns. In 1985 she left her job at the City Art Gallery to join the Wellington Media Collective as its only female graphic designer, attracted by the political commitment of its members, their collaborative processes, non-hierarchical structure, and the widely varied nature of the work. Several of her early jobs had made her personally aware of the subsidiary positions of women in design, and the sexual politics of design employment. She particularly remembers one older male employer who ran his young, all female studio "like a harem" (Murdoch 2011). At the Collective she regularly by choice designed for women's rights and feminist community support and resource groups, as local society was struggling to address the range of historical discriminations against women (fig. 7). This impetus had come to New Zealand initially from international second wave feminism, but took local forms within an on-the-ground sustained campaign.
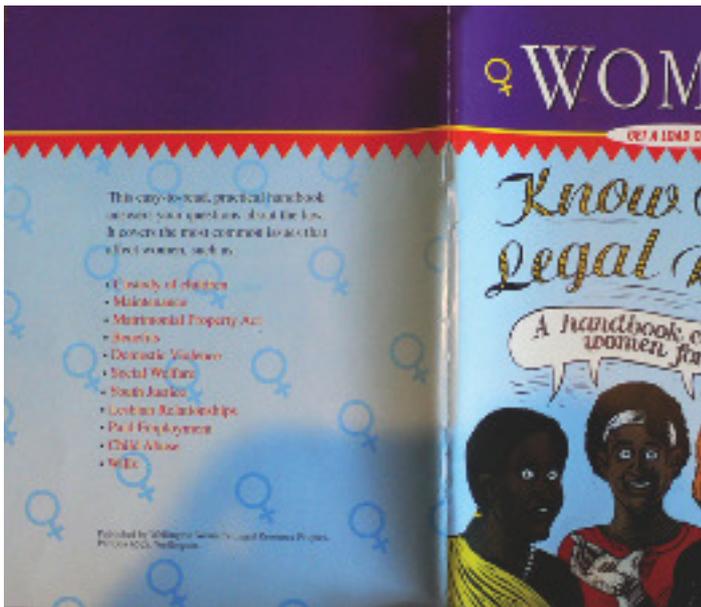
Fig. 7 Sharon Murdoch, *Women Know Your Legal Rights*, c1986

Fig. 8 Sharon Murdoch, *On the Job, c.1987*

The Collective believed that when activist visual communication design functioned within a democratic society, it must serve that society's diverse and pluralistic needs. To do this it must be integrated into the 'everyday', acting not only as a revolutionary style for big issues, but also as a daily, bread and butter servicing of democratic access to information and skills in an attempt to correct deeply undemocratic imbalances between the included and excluded. The clients the Collective accepted, and to whom they also offered services of copy-writing, journalism, and photography, were social, community or cultural organisations or agencies with little access to funding, (Fig. 8)

Such designs as these meet Bruno Latour's description of the strength of design as lying within its modesty, humility and ephemerality (Latour 2008). In such a value system, authorship becomes immaterial, and all design essentially a redesign – a re- solution of problems that must be persistently, even cyclically, addressed, and it is here that the products and processes of visual communication design can serve communities, publics, and democracies (Fig. 9).

Fig. 9 Sharon Murdoch, Dave Kent, *Newtown Community Creche*, c1988

Sharon Murdoch acknowledges inspiration from Posy Simmonds and Linda Barry. The style of her designs is more clearly identifiable than Chris's, and strongly supported by her skills in illustration. As with his use of screenprinting, the aesthetic of Sharon's work gains much of its feeling of authenticity from the reflection of woodcut and scraperboard techniques (Fig. 10). As Sharon's gendered experiences were different to those of the males in the Collective, so she acknowledges "the markers through her life" were different, particularly in the way emotions, personal relationships and sexual politics "figured quite large in the overall scheme of things" (Murdoch 2011), notably her decisions to take, or leave, jobs. Her memories involve personal and group relationships and dynamics, as much as work itself. This is very different to the memories of the male designers in the Collective, who appear to have been more focused on politics and

their work. Sharon's honesty would seem to confirm that with issues of gender, or in the experience of disadvantage, the personal is inseparable from the political. While unapologetically left wing, the Collective members subscribed to no single unifying political theory. However in their work they closely fulfilled Gui Bonsiepe's definition of design humanism he believed was essential to democracy. He describes this as "the exercise of design activities in order to interpret the needs of social groups, and to develop viable emancipative proposals in the form of material and semiotic artifacts. Why emancipative? Because humanism implies the reduction of domination" (Bonsieppe 2006, p. 30).

Fig. 10 Sharon Murdoch (Illustration & design), Keri Elvin (author), *Titiro Whakarongo* (Look and Listen),
double page spread, c1988.

In the case of Chris McBride and Sharon Murdoch, it was not from design training, but from their lives that their values were formed, and

their activism stimulated. Visual communication design allowed them to integrate belief with work. Both acknowledge their anger at inequalities and injustices, but their designs, like much of those of the Collective, are rarely overtly, or stylistically 'angry'. Angry graphic activism, like personal anger, is difficult to sustain, and can have a limited semiotic range. In their case it is rather the result of a committed, identification with, and desire to serve, their clients and a strategic long-term, if not lifelong, commitment to action to bring about change. Collective works were almost never personally attributed because of these principles (what identifications have been made have been retrospective), but also because so many pieces were the result of collective processes. This is literally a de-signing, in the words of Bruno Latour again, indicating the lack of hubris in both the term and processes of design and "a post-promethean sense of what it is to act" (Latour 2008, p. 3). Similarly, while both Chris and Sharon generously acknowledge international inspiration and influence, it is not an influence feeding from a centre to a periphery, an authority to a subaltern. They clearly believe that any international forms or theories have no authenticity unless transformed to serve local needs, and this transformation must take place in independence, not subservience to a borrowed or germinal idea. It is from local and personal needs and audiences - or publics -that such activism finds its designed forms, and becomes a paradigm of pragmatism, in the service of effective communication for change. This pragmatism goes some way to

explaining how the Collective's work does not easily fit into any stylistic canon of activist graphics as seen in much of the work shown, for example, in recent publications about activist design referenced earlier in this paper (McQuiston 1999 and 2004, Heller and Vienne 2003, Glaser and Ilic 2006).

The Wellington Media Collective worked within a society that from the 1900s had often referred to itself as "the world's social laboratory" (Belich 2001, p. 46), for its liberal state and social welfare policies. Like all Western democracies these have been subject to much wear and tear. The Collective's graphic activism provides a cogent example of how design can assist in not just the achievement, as there is no clearly definable endpoint, but the essential maintenance, regeneration, and redesign, of a fair and just society. This is a model of graphic activism that compliments the adrenalin, follows from the conflict, moves forward from the outrage, acts to redress the injustice. This is revolutionary graphic activism, after the revolution.

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