Political Identity
By Yael Maayani

10/03/03

Political Identity

Traditionally groups of people used visual elements to identify themselves and represent their unique characteristics. Visual identity can be traced back to indigenous times and its development is parallel to and reflects the social and political changes of diverse societies over time. One of the first organized identity campaigns that used visual identity to gain political awareness and bring about change was organized by the Women’s Social and Political Union (the WSPU) for the rights of women to vote in England.

The WSPU creatively and innovatively used a medium that is mostly used for commercial purposes to gain political power. They used consistent colors, icons, and logos on merchandizing and print collaterals. They designed photographs, postcards, posters, banners, cartoons, brochures, letterhead, medals, clothing and tea sets to carry their identity and messages. In addition they staged mass demonstrations and tapped into the popular arts like theatre. They used design to make a mark and maximize their political presence to affect public awareness and shape political debate that will bring to a change. (1) (2)

Visual Language is often used to identify cultural or social groups through the media, primarily the visual media. Activist groups use their visual identity in the context of a political protest to access large audiences, create a debate, and bring their frustrations to public awareness. Once the group is in the public spotlight it can penetrate the political realm that ignored or misrepresented them until that point. (5) They receive enough publicity and get into the historic record. To make enough impact, and cause change, the groups need to communicate their messages effectively. They can chose to be forceful, provocative, peaceful and decorative as long as they get significant media attention. The disposition a protest takes will naturally become an integral part of the group’s public image, it is their communication tool.

Political protests take different shapes. For example the peace marches against the Invasion of Iraq in 2002 and 2003. Extreme movements such as the 911 attack by terrorists. The attack on the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas and their deaths in the resulting fire in 1993. The mass marches and rallies of the Nazi movement in the 1930s. The Mother Jones march to Washington in 1903 with the exploited children, events such as the 1965 Watts riots in LA. and finally strikes such as the United Farm Workers Organization in California. The proliferation of the Internet enables new ways of activism, such as moveon.org, a grass roots organization working to connect broad public opinion to legislators by building electronic advocacy groups.

Governments and people in power can also arrange political demonstrations to exhibit their power. For example military parades, air shows and a recent one is
arresting Israeli pilots and threatening imprisonment for life because of their refusal to bomb civilians in Palestine.

The evolution of political identity and design was particularly interesting in context of the latest peace movement demonstration in the US and around the world. Millions of people of all ages and cultures participated. They came with no distinct visual identity, just wearing their regular cloths, and they showed up en mass. By not being distinct in their identity they identified themselves as the mainstream in their countries. A noticeable design aspect that appeared in these demonstrations was the sophisticated design of the messages and the signs people carried. It was an informed public that did not buy into politics of deception, a crowd that talked and understood the language of design. This two became part of their identity.

Historically design is perceived with nationalistic and emotional associations. Through form, color and letterform design is used as an instrument for unifying people and giving them an identity and voice. With the proliferation of the media and media access to the public, and with the blurring lines between government and business, advertising and identity design is being used more than ever for political purposes. Activists groups, social and political movements, lobbyists, companies, and individuals are launching campaigns and maximizing their public appearances to establish their desired image and market their messages. The goal is to gain political power and influence and pave the way to the hearts and pockets of decision makers. The competition for a successful identity is huge and there are millions of dollars at stake. With globalization, nations are now seeking to brand themselves in the effort to design an identity that will benefit their political and economical position in the global market.

By nature political identity has two sides, an identity created by a group that represents itself with a voice that speaks for it self, and an identity that is created for the group by the media. Many times these two representations will collide and fight for dominance of public attention, because public opinion and acceptance will determine the political implications that will follow. In the struggle to gain public acceptance groups, businesses and politicians are now creating their identity not by who they real are and what they really stand for, but by what they think people want them to be. Identity design now follows popular culture and trends instead of standing on its own. As a result the image created is not trustworthy and we find that identity design today is suffering of an identity crisis. The political consequences are mistrust and fragmentation of our democratic institutions. As the tendency to design an identity is increasing, the public is growing weary.

Yael

(3) “Blackletter: Type and National Identity” Edited by Peter Bain and Paul Shaw. The Cooper Union For the Advancement of Science and Art, 1998
(5) “Simulated Histories” Stuart McKee, Visible Language, 28.4 Part #2, Rhode Island School of Design, 1994