

## Feminist graphics

Uqui Permui Martinez

### Graphic design as an expression of ideas

Contemporary Feminism has a long history filled with messages and marks painted on the street that function as a direct and rapid way to communicate a political message. This type of graffiti is usually made spontaneously by the activists themselves. In spite of the precarious nature of the graphics, they were and continue to be in many cases the only way to visualize and diffuse a message which is contrary to established discourse.

In this sense, these messages could be considered weapons of subversive communication, both illegal and anonymous. The signs used in demonstrations are used in a similar fashion, as well as the body when employed as a political tool, albeit of course less anonymous. In any case, the different uses of graphics in fact have more in common than perhaps we initially perceive.

### Graphic Activism

Since the 1970's the feminist movements have been among the most active social collectives throughout the world, and have used all types of creative tools in order to express themselves collaboratively giving importance to the process of inventing slogans as well as the materialization and production. Techniques like collage combined with photography, apart from being appropriate for collective work are clearly transgressive. As Raquel Pelta indicates, "they bury the formal purity which historically has dominated avant guard graphic design as evidenced by the Swiss School. In this sense, in feminist graphics we can find proposals which are quite 'dirty', similar to the aesthetic of the punk movement."<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, Martha Scotford calls these graphics 'messy history', an alternative form of communication which transgresses conventions. Scotford and Pelta alike place feminist graphics in opposition to the ordered history of the privileged, heteronormative middle class. Sheilla Levrant, a designer and investigator, relates this disorder to *patchwork* done by women considered as an assemblage in space and time of experiences and fragments, in contrast to patriarchal rationalism which disdains the personal in favor of the universal.<sup>2</sup>

Along these lines we find work by various feminist

groups like the Chicago Women's Graphics Collective (CWGC), founded in 1970 and active until 1983, but continue to be recognized as an example of feminism, activism, and design with a social awareness.

The (CWGC) organized training workshops for women who wanted to join the group. The signs and slogans were made collectively in encounters where self criticism was an essential ingredient for efficient results.<sup>3</sup> This collective used different techniques in which the typographic treatment is of special interest as can be appreciated in the suggestive compositions and lettering of posters like cartel *Women are not chicks*, or *Women working*.<sup>4</sup> The workshop closed in 1990.

Also, the London based group See Red Women's Workshop composed of former art students created banners collectively in 1974. "We met through an advertisement in Red Rag, a radical feminist magazine, which called for women interested in forming a group which would analyze and combat images which degraded women in publicity and mass communication."<sup>5</sup>

A different case was Riot Grill which was a feminist collective formed in the United States in the early 90's linked to the independent music scene. According to Kim Gordon of Sonic Youth, the main goal was "to bombard the phalocratic neurological center of rock and roll."<sup>6</sup> One of the first groups was Bikini Kill and the first fanzine was edited in 1992. Among the best known references is Kurt Cobain and his group Nirvana. This influence pervaded the Spanish context although to a lesser degree with groups like Pauline en la Playa, Las Vulpes, Hello Cuca, and others. In terms of typography it is a clear example of the eclecticism that was experienced in almost all of the "Do it yourself" social movements with diverse, radical, and dirty proposals typical of the punk movement.

During the 1980's, Barbara Kruger's work is especially notable for her use of a determined typography, Futura Bold, with the intention of directly addressing her audience in public and capturing their attention with the thickness of the letters and font size. A condensed form of the font Futura is also used in by the artistic collective Guerilla Girls.

Although until now the examples I have mentioned are of robust typography-bold and straight lines- I have also encountered the use of calligraphic type, principally in Latin America. In terms of being a graphic in small case letters written in continuous form, it could be said that this type is at the opposite pole from the previous one. An example can be observed in the Mexican collective Polvo

de Gallina Negra. Founded in 1983 by Maria Bustamante and Monica Mayer, it is one of the first feminist art groups in Mexico still active. Likewise, the Bolivians Mujeres creando used written calligraphy for their street paintings which has a pleasant and personal affect in contrast to its aggressive content. Its usage can also be an expression of rejection toward center European typography. This collective, which continues to be active since the late 1980's, published books and magazines like "La mujer pública" with a very similar graphic style to that of their street art resulting in their own recognizable identity.

I found another interesting case in Cairo (Egypt), where women played an important part in the counter-culture demonstrations rooted in the Arab Spring in 2011, given the frequency with which they are the object of repression. One image which became a feminist revolutionary icon was that of a group of police agents attacking a semi-nude female protester wearing a veil. This image inspired various activists like the graffiti artists Bahia Shehab, Mira Shihadeb, and Geel Shaikh who began to paint the walls of Cairo with a stencil depicting a blue bra and the message, "Long live the pacifist revolution". As these artists declare, "urban art is a way of undermining the comfort zone and the religious circles."<sup>7</sup> The group of graffiti artists Sit Alhita was created to give visibility and presence to women in public spaces.

In all of these manifestations what becomes evident is the relationship between the dirty and bold spontaneous street graphics, and the social movements in general, but in particular the feminist movement due to its ample street activity. In addition we find a homogeneous usage of graphics within the collectives as form of identity to be recognizable and to recognize themselves.

Whether it is the use of upper case bold letters or the use of calligraphy, it is a question of reaching the audience as quickly as possible, and breaking down the old dichotomy which relates masculinity with the public sphere and femininity with the domestic one. This identification lead Carmen Nogueira to use bold upper case lettering in the project, "Contenedor de feminismos" (Carmen Nogueira, Uqui Permui, and Anxela Caramés) and I myself also considered it appropriate for the graphics in this exhibition, which stages a constant dialog between art and activism. Lastly, I would like to mention the use of the lambda as a way to reinforce the letter 'y' and widen its meaning. The lambda is known internationally since the 1970's as a symbol for the LGTBQI movements.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Raquel Pelta, *Feminismo: una contribución crítica al diseño*. Monográfica, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Ece Canli, "Design History Interrupted. A Queer-Feminist Perspective", in *The responsible objects*, ed. Marjanne van Helvert (Valiz, Amsterdam, 2016), pp. 188-197.

<sup>3</sup> The Chicago Women's Graphics Collective. Disponible en: <http://archive.is/f3DVn>

<sup>4</sup> *Posters can be seen at* <https://www.facebook.com/graficafeminista/> o en OMCA Collections <http://collections.museumca.org/?q=list/taxonomy/term/34061&page=>

<sup>5</sup> See *Red Women's workshop, Feminist Posters 1974-1990*. Four Corners Books, London, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Available at: [https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Riot\\_grrrl](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Riot_grrrl)

<sup>7</sup> Noemí López Trujillo, *Graffiti, un arma contra el acoso sexual en Egipto*. El Español, January 29, 2016