

Research in Practice

Music, Feminism, and Campaigns

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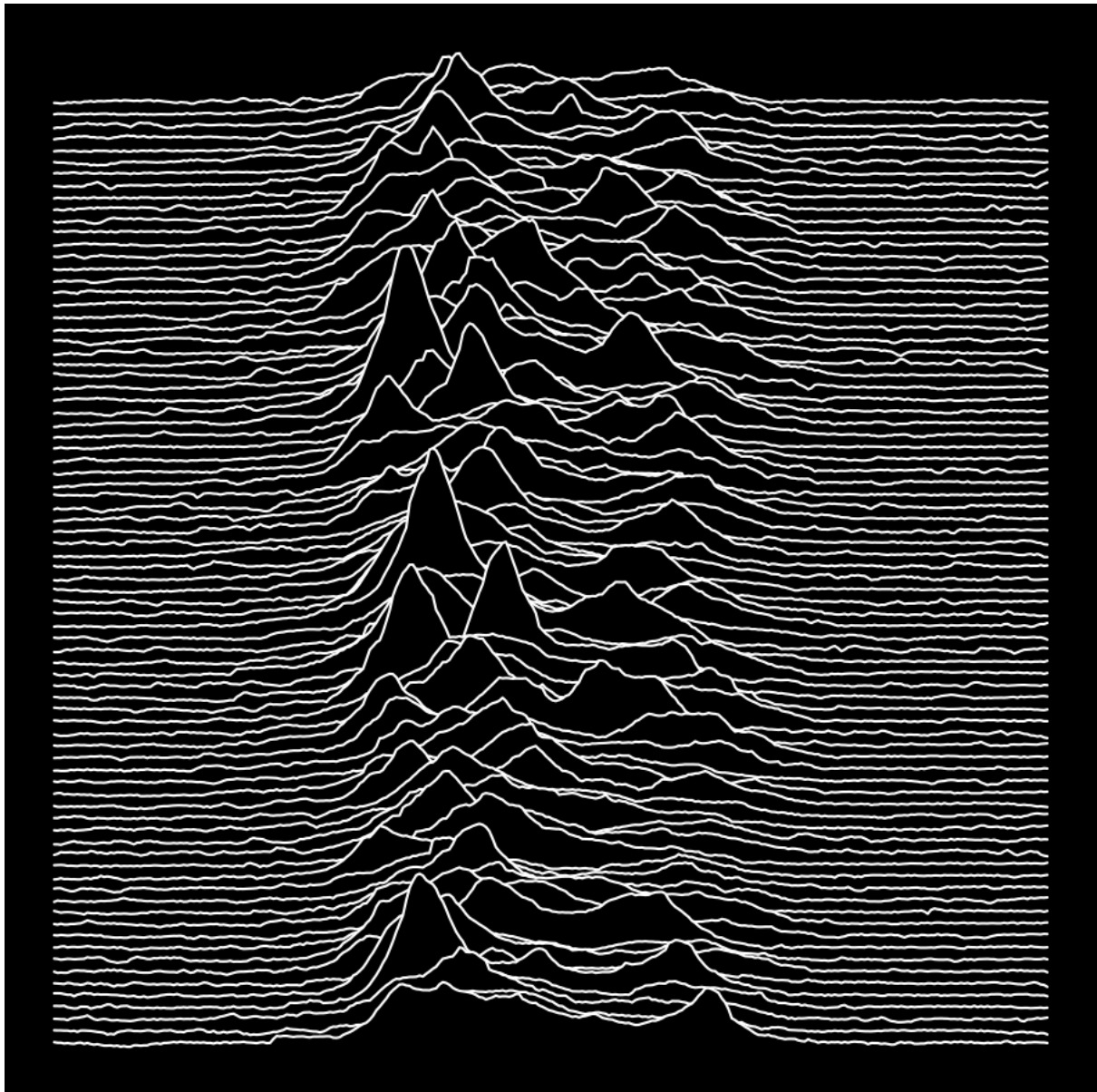
“How was graphic design performed as a tool for cultural individuality and political confrontation across music, feminism and campaign activism?”

Music, Feminism, and Campaigns

Graphic design is often made out to be a professional institute that specifies in branding, marketing, and aesthetics – but it is considerably more than that. Design influences perception, shapes individuality and communicates principles. In this essay, I will be studying the role of graphic design through three keywords that I have chosen myself: music, feminism, and campaigns. These will relate to visual artists that I found interest in during my research, such as Peter Saville (music), Barbara Kruger (feminism), and Milton Glaser (campaigns). These will co-exist with philosophers including Robin Poynor and Heller and Ballance.

Music

Graphic design in music is used as a visual demonstration of an artist’s audible uniqueness. Just the same as music communicates itself through rhythm, timing, harmony and song lyrics, graphic design aligns with this by using typography, colour, and composition. The aesthetical choices that are made by a graphic designer when creating an identity for a music artist determines the audiences view and the creation of deep audience interactions.



(Fig 1) Saville, P. (1979) *Unknown Pleasures*

(Accessed April 8th, 2025)

The iconic, monochrome artwork that was created for joy divisions '*Unknown Pleasures*' (1979), designed by British graphic designer Peter Saville, has become the most recognised album cover of the band's callous, punk sound. The design that presents waveforms visually reflects the bands observational aesthetic and audible experimentation. According to Poynor, R (2003), the visual identity had a massive part to play in the mythologizing of Joy Division, demonstrating impeccably how graphic design can help build a cultural legacy. Visual elements can also

influence how people decipher the music that they hear. This is supported by ideas of cross modal perception, where interaction and integration of information from different sensory inputs, such as touch, vision, and hearing, lead to a diverse insight of the world. Howell, B (2013) found that what we hear and see often aligns with shape aesthetic judgement. This means that an aggressive, gothic looking album cover will push listeners to believe that the music is more intense than what it is. This visual effect is evident in music marketing. When we think of pop album covers, we don't think of monochrome colours, we think of bright designs and fun cartoon-style writing. These design elements create preconceptions of what the music will be like before the first note is heard. Lupton, E and Phillips, J.C (2015) critiques that "Design is not an afterthought in the music industry – it is central to audience expectations and emotional engagement".

In the digital age, the consumption of new music is often streamed using music apps, music videos, popular social media platforms and live performances. Graphic design is used to enrich the engrossing potential of all these experiences. Streaming apps such as Spotify, Apple Music, YouTube and Soundcloud use consistent company branding. – colour schemes, typography, icons, and layouts. "This guides the users discovery of new music, and these interfaces shape how users using the sites distinguish and arrange their music" Hesmondhalgh, D, (2013). Similarly, at live events such as concerts, the stage visuals, lighting, merch stands, and promotional features are all used to form a unified language that increases the music's narrative and overall aesthetic.

Design is instrumental in codifying musical genres and signalling subcultural affiliations. In music, genre codification refers to how different styles of music have a certain look, sound and style that define them. For example, punk music includes faster tempos, heavy guitars, and vulgar lyrics. Over time, these characteristics have become so fixed in societies perception of

punk music that it has helped to characterize the genre. On the other hand, subcultural affiliation refers to how music fits into certain subgroups – groups of people with shared curiosities, ethics and lifestyles that often aren't considered mainstream or 'trendy'. Music is a way for these subcultures to express their identity, such as punk rock genre being tied to a rebellious and alternative subculture. These two terms are directly linked to graphic design through visual language used in music branding, album art, posters, merchandise, and stage visuals. Graphic design is the core of reinforcing both the musical genre and the subculture that it's associated with, helping to mould the identity of both the music and the listeners. Hebdige, D (1979) states that "Style - including graphic design – is central to subcultural resistance and differentiation". This means that when fans of a music artist wear the merchandise or collect vinyl's, they aren't just listening to the music, they are contributing to broader cultural and visual language.

Feminism

Graphic design, traditionally taken over by male-dominated storylines, has experienced changes thanks to feminist designers who tested old-fashioned norms, led new visual languages, and examined the power structures fixed in design. Female designers not only paid a contribution towards the aesthetics of design but also ideologically, using design as the core of activism, individuality, and inclusion. Barbara Kruger is an American artist and graphic designer known for her iconic artwork of mixing daring images with confrontational typography. She effectively blurred the limitations between fine art and graphic design. Known for her signature black and white imagery, blanketed with font type Futura bold in opaque red boxes, Kruger's work challenges consumerism, media manipulation and patriarchy norms.



(Fig 2) Kruger, B. (1989) *Your Body is a Battleground*

(Accessed April 8th, 2025)

Her iconic piece “your body is a battleground” (1989), created for a pro-choice rally against anti-abortion activists in Washington, is a great example of how graphic design can serve political confrontation. Kruger’s use of design aesthetic to undermine male-controlled messages proves how feminist critique can be embedded in design form itself. As Heller, S and Ballance, C. (2001) stated, Kruger’s work “uses the visual language of mass communication to interrogate it’s very foundation”.

Another one of the most significant feminist figures in design is Sheila Levrant De Bretteville, whose work is a hybrid of feminist belief with participatory design. In 1973, she became the co-founder of The Women’s Building in Los Angeles, a feminist art and education centre that served

as a hub for women in the arts or looking to get started in the industry. The building became a symbol of empowerment for women in Los Angeles, a safe space where they could celebrate each other and their work, and a place where they knew their opinions would be valued. De Bretteville is also known for supporting collaborative design projects with help from the locals in the Los Angeles area. As Director of the Graphic Design Department at Yale, she has repurposed the design tutoring by introducing feminism and feminist theory into their teaching curriculum. “Her work and teaching emphasise that design isn’t neutral, it reflects and reinforces power dynamics” Klein, J. (1996).



(Fig 3) Douglas, E. (1967) *Untitled print of a mother with a rifle slung over her shoulder*

While not a woman, Emory Douglas is a significant figure in historical graphic design and political activism. As the minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party from 1967 to early 1980's, Douglas was the brains behind creating the visual identity of the party. His revolutionary posters often featured a black woman in the foreground, fighting for change and rights. He didn't unequivocally identify as a feminist in the usual theoretical way, though it was clear through his design work that he worshiped women and everything women stand for. He displayed clear coalition with primary feminist values, especially within the circumstance of black freedom, intersectionality, and authorisation within the community. His art was elevating to black women, boosting their morale to keep fighting for rights. Feminist designers often talk about

Douglas as an example of comprehensive political design that inspired and marginalized voices, particularly black women, in dissimilarity to the overriding white, male graphic narratives of the time. Douglas's work is an example of intersectional design which "centres race, gender and class in its visual messaging" Hooks, B (1981)



(Fig 4) Guerrilla Girls (1985) "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?"

The Guerrilla Girls are an unidentified group of feminist artists and campaigners formed in New York City in the mid 80's. They have become recognised worldwide for their use of graphic design, objection art and sarcasm to reveal gender and racial inequality within the art world. Their incognito identities, rebellious humour and data driven posters have reformed how

feminist review operates in the public sphere. Their iconic posters such as “*Do women have to be naked to get into the met museum?*” use impactful designs, sans serif fonts and positive colours to challenge marginalisation in the art world. The reason they created this specific piece was because it was apparent that there was a lack of female artists in art galleries, the only women featured are the ones naked in paintings. Their design strategy deliberately mimics advertising to grab attention while subverting mainstream messages. As. “A form of visual protest, their work underscores how graphic design can democratize female discourse and reach public audiences beyond academic or gallery settings.” Pollock, G (1998).

Campaigns

Graphic design campaigns are cultural powers that mould the public’s view, political ideas, and consumer behaviour. The most famous graphic design campaigns throughout the years have achieved recognition worldwide not just because of their visuals, but because they mobilised imagery, typography, and messaging to communicate influential narratives.



(Fig 5) Glaser, M. (1977) “*I love New York City*”

Milton Glaser's campaign "I love New York City" is one of the most persistent examples of graphic designs emotive and educational reach. It was created in the late 70's while tourism and morale in New York was at its lowest. The city was facing an economic and social crisis at the same time and needed a campaign that was enriching and positive. The design itself being very basic was designed by Glaser in the back of a taxi on an old envelope that he had found in his bag. Its success lies in its simplicity, a basic typewriter font with a basic colour scheme, but it is adaptable, and the people of New York connected with it emotionally. As Heller, S (2008) once stated, the campaign "turned into a universal language", converting public identity into individual expression. The design not only assisted to rebrand the city, but it became a global trend for other cities to use this branding as their own.



(Fig 6) Fairey, S. (2008) *"Hope"*

Shepard Fairey is an American contemporary artist, graphic designer, activist, and business owner. This piece of art, which is regarded as a breakthrough in modern political graphic design, became one of the most well-known political posters of the twenty first century. The states were struggling with the Iraq war, economic uncertainty and growing calls for political reform and a new leader when the poster was created. Obama was the first black candidate of a major party, which was big deal as this showed potential for historical change. Fairey was inspired by Obama's Rhetoric and morals, particularly his prominence on hope, unity, and grassroots enablement. The image is more than just a portrait, the campaign became a participatory visual movement. it became a form of pictorial utilisation, motivating younger voters and emphasising Obama's messaging. Its pop-art aesthetic, suggestive of propaganda, gave it a characteristic of avant-garde confidence. Since its release, this image has been adapted by grassroots supporters, demonstrating how digital age design can have an impact and can serve as a rallying point for political identity. McQuiston, L (2009) when asked about the poster stated that

“it achieved iconic status in part because it aligned optimism with activism in a time of political uncertainty”.



(Fig 7) Finkelstein, A. (1987) *"Silence equals death"*

The expression 'silence equals death' is one of the most influential and persistent refrains in activist graphic design, especially within the perspective of the AIDs crisis and LGBTQ+ rights. Although the poster portrays itself to be rather plain, its' impact was vast. It reclaimed the symbol that was used by the Nazi's to differentiate homosexuals in concentration camps, so the poster recontextualised it as a sign of endurance. Avram Finkelstein, an American artist, writer and activist who was a proud founding member of the art collective gran fury - which was intimately linked to the aids activism group 'ACT UP' - designed the campaign. Finkelstein's campaign succeeded in changing the attitudes of homophobes and making them aware of the extent of the AIDS pandemic by fusing political urgency with potent symbolism. As Duncombe, S (2002) explains, "Silence = Death transformed grief and anger into visual protest, galvanizing

support, and media attention for AIDS activism. It remains a seminal moment in queer visual culture and political design”.

Through the lenses of my chosen words, music, feminism, and campaigns, it is clear to say that graphic design exceeds its profitable associations to act as an expressive tool for cultural communication, assertiveness, political argument, and social change. Whether its Peter Saville’s waveforms catching the aura of post-punk music, Barbara Kruger’s courageous typography challenging gendered power structures, or Avram Finkelstein’s discreet visuals rallying a community in crisis – design has the capacity to motivate, disturb and provoke. As spoken about by theorists such as Poynor, Heller and Ballance, design is never neutral; it carries meaning, reflects ideas and shapes how we engage with our surroundings. By communicating through colour, form, typography and composition, graphic design connects us to both collective memory and radical futures. In a world that is overruled with visual business, the most impactful designs stand out not because they are on trend or look decorative, but because they have deep meaning. They give a voice to the people who are quiet, turn emotion into action and translate invisible tensions into something that audiences can feel and see. Ultimately, it is a language of confrontation, individuality, and storytelling—one that continues to grow with every social shift, yet always holds its power to move people.

My Question: *“How was graphic design performed as a tool for cultural individuality and political confrontation across music, feminism and campaign activism?”*

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List of figures

(Fig 1) Saville, P. (1979) *Unknown Pleasures* – Joy division
(Accessed April 8th, 2025)

(Fig 2) Kruger, B. (1989) *Your Body is a Battleground*
(Accessed April 8th, 2025)

(Fig 3) Douglas, E (1967) *Untitled print of a mother with a rifle slung over her shoulder*.
(Accessed April 9th, 2025)

(Fig 4) Guerrilla Girls (1985) "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?"
(Accessed April 9th, 2025)

(Fig 5) Glaser, M. (1977) "I love New York city".
(Accessed April 9th, 2025)

(Fig 6) Farey, S. (2008) "Hope"
(Accessed April 10th, 2025)

(Fig 7) Finkelstein, A. (1987) "Silence equals death"
(Accessed April 10th, 2025)

