

Obama Sightings

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The graphic features of the images of Obama in his 2008 presidential campaign were a fundamental tool in achieving communication of the message and the values represented by his candidature. To great extent its enormous success was due to the work of designer Shepard Fairey, since these first images—and the ones that came later—made Obama a graphic icon and a symbol of hope in the future and in change.

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If we didn't know Barack Obama as a politician, we wouldn't be surprised to see him in a Pepsi commercial, clinking glasses with a group of young moderns at a social gathering in a high-rise apartment. That is to say, he does not innately stand out as a striking visual icon. Yet, he became one thanks to his meteoric rise to the presidency and the hope for political change that large numbers of people have invested in him.

The ubiquity of Obama imagery began during the presidential campaign of 2008, highlighted by graphic designer Shepard Fairey's two silkscreen posters that showed Obama with his head tilted slightly upward and his eyes fixed resolutely on a distant horizon. Fairey produced two variations of the poster, one coupling the image with the word "Hope" and another with the word "Progress." The posters sold out quickly and Fairey's image was adopted for the official inauguration poster after Obama won the election.¹ Positioned on Obama's left lapel is Sol Sender's campaign logo that likewise emphasizes a horizon created by three red stripes framed by a grey circle. The initial images of hope, however, were followed during his term of office by a volley of imagery that either satirized or severely criticized him.

Fairey based his image on a photograph of Obama and Rahm Emanuel at the National Press Club in Washington taken by Associated Press photographer Mannie Garcia (Fig. 2). In the Garcia photograph, both Emanuel and Obama have turned their heads towards something or someone outside the picture frame, possibly another speaker on the podium. Fairey's isolation of Obama's head for his posters created a new graphic space where the head tilt and glance could be given an inspirational meaning.

Fairey's transposition of Obama into a visionary leader is similar to the way Cuban photographer Alberto Korda's iconic photograph of Che Guevara became an inspirational image to people all over the world.² In fact, the image of Che, rather than Fidel Castro, turned into the logotype of the Cuban Revolution, at least outside Cuba. What the Obama and Che images share is a gaze that seems directed towards a better future to which both men would lead us. One difference between the two figures, however, is that the visual image of Che has been transmitted primarily, though not exclusively, through the Korda photograph, which has been emblazoned on everything from tee shirts to wine bottle labels, while Obama has been the subject of hundreds of depictions in multiple poses, many of them critical, by professional artists and amateurs alike, both during the campaign and during his term as president (Fig. 5).³

In the portfolio that follows, I present five images of Obama that fluctuate from the serious to the playful (see pp. 36-39). All are from Chicago, posted around the time of the 2008 election except the last one, which is from Opatija, a seaside town in Croatia. The first image is one of a series of banners that were posted in downtown Chicago to congratulate President Obama on his 2008 election victory (Fig. 3). Paid for by Mayor Richard M.

01

The National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. bought one of Fairey's posters, wagering that it would retain its iconic supremacy over time.

02

See DAVID KINDLE: *Chef Guevara: Icon, Myth, and Message* (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History in collaboration with the Center for the Study of Political Graphics, 1997) and MICHAEL CASEY: *Che's Afterlife: the Legacy of an Image* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009). Fairey has adopted the Korda image of Che in some of his own graphics. See *Obey: Supply and Demand. The Art of Shepard Fairey* (Berkeley: Gingko Press, 2009), 98, 357. For one poster, Fairey replaced the facial features of Che with those of his signature figure, Andre the Giant.

03

See RANDY KENNEDY: "Obama's Face (That's Him?) Rules the Web," *The New York Times* (May 31, 2009), 1.

Daley's campaign committee, they adopted the Fairey icon, which still remains the most generic of the Obama images, along with the logo designed by Sol Sender.

The second image is a mural that was painted on a wall on Halsted St. in Lincoln Park (Fig. 1). It is attributed to a group called We Are Supervision and is linked to several other murals in Los Angeles, and Venice, Calif. This mural, which appeared during the 2008 campaign, emphasizes Obama's African-American facial features and presents him as an imposing superhero with paint spots flying off his body as if they were shards of energy.

A cooler image of Obama was one of several painted by a Chicago graphic artist, Ray Noland). Several variants appeared on building walls before the 2008 election, depicting Obama as a silhouette figure connected via a microphone to the nation (Fig. 4). The first of Noland's murals I found was on a building just west of the downtown on which he subsequently painted a second image of Obama after the election shaking hands with a figure whose head is the United States map. Noland also posted some of his Obama posters on the building, which has remained unharmed or untagged by other street artists. The initial images still remain after four years. In 2008, Noland painted another image of Obama on a downtown building, which was quickly covered over either by the City of Chicago or the building management. After the 2008 election, I found a witty example of Obama iconography posted on a towing company's sign with Obama's head in the tow truck and John McCain's on the car being towed (Fig. 7). And I photographed several months later the same picture, both images scraped off.

Finally, I include a droll example of Obama's popularity abroad. It was photographed in May 2009 at the Croatian seaside resort of Obatija. The sign was created for the annual meeting of the Association of Croatian Advertising Agencies and was intended simply as a bit of fun. It simulates the front page of the *Večernji list* (Evening Newspaper) whose headline and text read, "Washington: World Recognition of Our Success. Obama made a reception for our geniuses. The American president has sent a plane to pick up our marketing team, which enchanted the whole world and saved the world's economy. The Croatian president says he insists on giving the designers the highest national medals (Fig. 6)".

What characterizes the Obama images from the 2008 campaign and the period shortly thereafter,

whether serious or droll, is that Obama represented a new beginning and a basis for hope. He effectively became a screen onto which people all over the world could project their own aspirations, thus ensuring that over time there would be no single icon that crystallized Obama's meaning as Korda's portrait of Che did for the Cuban revolution and for revolution in a generic sense. Today, the Cuban revolution no longer inspires political radicals as it once did and consequently the thousands of Che tee shirts around the world have been drained of their political immediacy even though the image of Che still denotes for some people a general meaning of revolutionary spirit. This has not happened to Fairey's iconic Obama posters or to the many other images of Obama since he was not able to fulfill all the promises he made for his first term. His campaign for the 2012 election has kept the Sol Sender logo but has not used the Fairey posters, thus playing down all the expectations that the posters originally embodied. After four years of opposition by the Republican Party, those who continued to support the President drastically scaled down their expectations, many basing their vote simply on the hope that he would defeat the Republican candidate Mitt Romney, whose plans to keep tax cuts in place for the wealthy and slash social programs seemed far worse than a President Obama who would at least try to make life better even though he has had to fight Republican opposition on the one hand and has tolerated a number of distasteful practices such as deporting many illegal immigrants and maintaining a number of violations of civil rights on the other.

Depending on what he can accomplish during his time in the White House and how, he and his staff are able to continue positioning him as the world's most powerful symbol of hope for change.

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