

In Love & War: The Anti-War Poster Art of the 1960s

‘To us, the anti-war movement during the Vietnam Era is important not because it stopped the war, which it may or may not have done; rather it is important because it existed. It is a reminder to Americans that times come when citizens can and, indeed, must challenge their government’s authority,’ Nancy Zaroulis and Gerald Sullivan announce to their readers already in the foreword of their book *Who Spoke Up? American Protest Against the War in Vietnam 1963-1975* (xi). They make it quite clear that they wish to remind the American people how much power they possess if they stand together.

The Vietnam War is one of the most debated wars in American history. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial that was erected and dug into the National Mall in Washington DC in 1982 is tucked to the ground, most visible from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, its direct opposite. In contrast to the Lincoln Memorial’s shining white temple and central position on the National Mall, the Vietnam Memorial is black, hid and pushed to the side. Lincoln’s temple with the giant statue of him inside of it seems to be placed so that Abe can look directly at congress and keep a judging eye on the politicians who are running the country now, while the veterans of the Vietnam War have been buried in the mall and overlook nothing but their visiting family members, American patriots and tourists passing by. The memorial’s black, reflecting wall holds the names of the more than 58,000 soldiers who gave their lives in the war and reminds visitors that they may have been one of them. As tourists walk along the wall, deeper and deeper into the memorial, the names of the soldiers seem to be written on the reflection of your body as if the tourists are to blame for the deaths; as if everyone is to blame for the war.

Memorial art teaches how a nation looks back on certain events in its history. It teaches how the nation values its own accomplishments or failures and the enemy’s actions in the light of the past. We learn very little about the national turmoil over the events during the time they went through them, and so we must look to the art produced in exactly those years to inform us. This essay focuses on a few examples of the poster art produced in the U.S. in the years of the Vietnam War and the American artists behind it. The essay has its point of departure in the anti-war movement, which, as we learned by the quote in the introduction was important mostly because it existed.

‘We’re not against the soldiers, we’re against the war’ ‘Make love, not war’ ‘Hey, Hey, LBJ. How many kids did you kill today?’ ‘One, two, three, four. We don’t want your fucking war’. These were some of the most common slogans of the anti-war organizations throughout the years of the Vietnam War. The protests were many and quite often large scale. For example, on April 17, 1965, 25,000 students protested against the Vietnam War by marching through Washington D.C.; at the same time, 25,000 American troops were serving in Vietnam. By the end of the year 184,000 American troops were serving in Vietnam. The next there were 385,000 and in 1967 a total of 486,000 American soldiers, most of whom had been drafted, soldiers were stationed in Vietnam. While 15,000 had lost their lives, the foreshadowing of what seemed to be a limitless sacrifice gave rise to more protests (Gitlin 10).

The anti-war movement challenged the authority of the American government. And was remarkable in gathering more people together than any other anti-war movement at any other time. The movement did not have any specific leader but was led by people who believed in their American heritage and in the American creed. The protests grew to immense proportions and lasted for many years because the war it opposed did exactly the same. The people involved in the movement did not necessarily agree on anything except the fact that they were against the war in Vietnam and it perfectly represented the melting pot that is the U.S. The participants in the movement were mostly adults, but younger members provided energy and ideas. Only a few of them were hippies and most were well aware that expansion of the mind through drugs and flower power would not change the mind of the politicians in charge of the killing in South East Asia. The members of the movement were ordinary people and did not try to solve the world’s problems by free love, LSD and rock music (Zaroulis and Sullivan 1984, xi).

It seemed impossible to make the government hear what the public had to say about the Vietnam War. It must have been that they did not want to hear the protesters since we know how many they were and often they gathered and made headlines. Could it be that the people in charge were afraid to admit that they were wrong? Maybe they were afraid to admit that the war had come too far? What was their limit? The My Lai Massacre in 1968 seemed to establish the limit for the artists of the Art Worker’s Coalition who used their art to make a statement about the genocide.

The poster ‘Q: And babies? A: And babies.’ by Art Worker’s Coalition (AWC) from 1970 was a part of a series of posters produced about the war in Vietnam. The poster is based on a

famous photo taken by army combat photographer, Ronald L. Haeberle, during the My Lai Massacre on March 16 and a quote from journalist Mike Wallace's CBS News television interview with soldier Paul Meadlo, who participated in the massacre, printed in red across the photograph (FamousPictures.org).



The Art Worker's Coalition was an organization established in New York City in January 1969 after a conflict between the artist Vassilakis Takis and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Takis wanted to be in total control of when and how his sculpture was exhibited in the museum after he had sold it, but MoMA went against his wishes and therefore Takis and some friends physically removed the sculpture from the exhibition. This conflict sparked the attention of other artists and a gathering was arranged on April 10, 1969, at which hundreds of people showed up. The AWC wanted MoMA and other museums in the city to address political and social events engage the concerns of the time, and take a stand against the Vietnam War. They thought contemporary art museums should deal with contemporary world issues. The meeting was a success and the artists planned a demonstration inside the museum for which the 'Q: And babies? A: And babies.' poster was produced. They placed themselves in front of Picasso's famous painting

‘Guernica’ with the posters in their hands to remind people that art work like this from 1937 would not tell them anything about the world today (Mousse Magazine.com).

Anti-war movements appeared everywhere, even in the artistic community, and artists felt the need and duty to use their voices to communicate to the American public that the Vietnam War needed to be stopped. The photograph from My Lai was chosen for the demonstration poster is remembered as one of the most despicable acts carried out by American soldiers during the war. Thirty soldiers in the Charlie Company, under the command of Lieutenant William Laws Calley, shot and killed around 300 civilians in the Vietnamese village. The mission was a so-called ‘search and destroy’ mission and the soldiers were commanded to go into the village and shoot everything that moved. During the weeks up to the massacre several American soldiers had been killed from stepping on mines in the same area and the troops were agitated and nervous as they walked into the village (PBS.org).



Haeberle was hired by the American army to document the actions of Charlie Company as it went through My Lai and had been given a camera with black/white film in it to record their work. He also brought his own camera, which had color film and that is the only reason why the pictures of the My Lai Massacre are in public hands today (Famouspictures.org).

When seeing the poster for the first time, people will most probably read the text before they look at the photograph. The quality of the photograph is not very good and the blood red text seems to demand your attention. The statement you are presented with is completely

straightforward: ‘Q: And babies? A: And babies.’ This is excruciatingly difficult to have read when you soon realize what you see in photograph. Women and children have been wounded, thrown in piles, and left in a ditch to die. An important element of the pictures is the little path coming directly at the viewer in the most honest fashion one can imagine; almost without shame, one might say. The fields on each side of the scene reflect food grown to sustain life human life, but the dead babies will not need rice. Moreover, the composition of the photograph seems confessional; the murderers have left the scene, most possibly in the direction of the viewer, but one man has stayed behind to make sure that the victims have some say – at least in the photograph. Furthermore, the composition leaves no air to the victims of the massacre or to the viewer who is left almost strangled with the tangled taste of the bodies. The fact that the photograph does not include any expanse of the sky above removes any chance that the victims will be saved by God and leaves us to conclude that this was an act of the devil or his minions. The color scale works from black to light grey to red to flesh and finally to green; the color which normally symbolizes hope. But no, the grass has withered in the burning sun and turned yellow and left the photograph forlorn and the murdered and the viewers without chance of salvation.

The interview between journalist Mike Wallace and soldier Paul Meadlo, from which the quote on the poster was taken, was given on December 14, 1969, and along with clips and pictures from actual combat in Vietnam turned the Vietnam War into the ‘living room war’ it became (Zaroulis and Sullivan 1984, xiii):

“[...] Q: So you fired something like sixty-seven shots?

A: Right

Q: And you killed how many? At that time?

A: Well, I fired them automatic, so you can't know how many you killed 'cause they were going fast. So I might have killed ten or fifteen of them.

Q: Men, women and children?

A: Men, women and children.

Q: And babies?

A: And babies.” (Famouspictures.org)

Due to lack of video footage available online, one cannot be quite sure of how to interpret Paul Meadlo's answers in the interview. When we only have his words written black on white, taken out of context and without intonation or facial expression they are bound to sound completely cold and inhumane, and therefore we must rely on other people's interpretations. On CBSnews.com the interview is described as '[...] the most shocking interview Wallace ever did', and Meadlo's statement about the My Lai Massacre is portrayed as a confession: '[...] Meadlo confessed his role in the My Lai massacre, the Vietnam atrocity by American troops that appalled the nation.' We can also read about Meadlo's statements during the interview with Wallace on Accuracy In Media's site (AIM.org), 'He [Paul Meadlo] said he felt like he was ordered to do it and at the time he thought he was doing the right thing. He [Paul Meadlo] also felt that losing his foot the next day when he stepped on a mine was retribution for what he had done the day before.' Accuracy In Media also states that Lieutenant Calley was convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison, but that public sympathy for him, expressed of mail to the White House 100-1 in favor of Calley, led President Nixon to reduce the court-ordered sentence to only three years of house. Many Americans celebrated Lieutenant Calley as a hero during and after his release, and of the group of fourteen soldiers who were charged with offenses from their actions in the My Lai Massacre, only three were tried and each of them found not guilty (Zaroulis and Sullivan 1984, 349).

As for, the reception of the news of the My Lai Massacre in the U.S. most Americans denied the truth. The country that had conducted the Nuremberg Trials after World War II could not possibly have committed war crime themselves, or so it was thought, and many people felt that the media's attention to the massacre and the interview of soldier Paul Meadlo by Mike Wallace was 'pimping to the [anti-war] protesters' and that they were definitely exaggerating the facts of the incident. The country could simply not accept the story and the news paper that had first published the news of My Lai, The Cleveland Plain Dealer, was perceived as 'anti-American' (Zaroulis and Sullivan 1984, 350).

We know that the anti-war movement consisted mainly of adults, but of course the younger generation did not just stand back and watch their parents protest the war; they took matters into their own hands. The Free Speech Movement (FSM) of the University of California, Berkeley, was the first and biggest student anti-war movement. It originated in the ban of any kind of off-campus political activities on campus, which the students saw as limiting their civil right of free speech. Demonstrations resulted in numerous arrests and an eventual agreement with Berkley

Chancellor Clark Kerr. From their focus on civil rights, the FSM moved further and further into dealing with anti-war demonstrations (Freeman 2004, 1178-1182).

The poster 'It's the Real Thing for S.E. Asia' from the poster collection of the University of California is proof of some of the FSM's anti-war advertisements. Unfortunately, the artist of the poster is unknown, so we cannot be sure if it was, indeed, created by someone inside the movement; however, the size and power of the movement leaves us with no other conclusion. The poster is precise, simple and eye-catching, especially because of its iconic focus point; the Coca Cola bottle. The text of the poster reads, 'It's the Real Thing for S.E. Asia' and on the bottle the word 'napalm' is printed in the original font of the Coca Cola Company. The sarcasm is evident and the viewer quickly understands that this is not simply anti-war propaganda; it is mockery of capitalism and of the U.S. in general. Next to the recognizable bottle we read 'Trade-Mark United States', and what is more American than Coca Cola, or in this case: Napalm.



The FSM demonstrated against the use of napalm in October 1966 and other universities immediately followed. Napalm was the Dow Chemical Company's most famous product and when the company tried to recruit students to work in their production on University of Wisconsin campus, demonstrations erupted (PBS.org). The use of napalm was authorized by President Johnson in March 1965 (UC Berkeley Library), but had also been in Japan during World War II. For the use in the Vietnam War, however, a substitute was produced: Napalm B. This napalm was both easier and more affordable to produce in large quantities. Moreover, it was mixed with a latex substance, which made it stick to the skin of the victims and stay there until the skin had melted off. Being the first televised war, pictures from Vietnam appeared on the public's TV screens every day, and the response to the use of napalm did nothing to enhance the popularity of the government. Pictures of children running down the street screaming, naked and covered in napalm posted in Rampart Magazine in January 1967 are said to have shaken Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to such a degree that he publicly announced his opposition to the war (PBS.org).

In the same month, a magazine with a larger circulation, *the Ladies' Home Journal*, published an article by a veteran journalist and wife of Ernest Hemingway, Martha Gellhorn. Gellhorn wrote about her experiences in South Vietnam and publicly stated that, 'I have witnessed modern war in nine countries, but I have never seen a war like the one in South Vietnam' (Zaroulis 104). The use of napalm, which did not only torture and leave the Vietnamese soldiers handicapped but also civilians, simply made the war in Vietnam different from earlier wars. This fact, along with the groundbreaking news about the My Lai Massacre made it difficult to stay a patriotic believer in one's own country. If we consider these facts and return to the napalm-poster from UC Berkeley, it is easier to understand the significance of the comparison between the famous American Coca Cola brand and napalm to an American audience. This poster is pure provocation, and its banality and simplicity emphasizes the absurdity of a chemical war against all Vietnamese people. The artist hit a soft spot by connecting two iconic items, and has put into words and picture what many Americans had known for a while; the Vietnam War must come to an end.

Another anti-war poster, 'Send Our Boys Home,' made by Cristos Gianakos in 1966 has the same approach to its theme as 'It's the Real Thing for S.E. Asia': How does the mockery of something inherently American, evaluate the nation as a whole? In 'Send Our Boys Home' we see the American flag, the Stars and Stripes, blasphemously altered. The blue square, which normally holds the white stars, has been exchanged for a black void with the result of completely removing

the essence of the national emblem. There is no longer hope for the nation, since the stars that represent each of the fifty states have been removed thereby announcing that the states no longer exist, meaning that the U.S.A. no longer exists and America is back to square one. The color of death has overpowered the heart of the U.S. and the white stripes are now left mirroring the rows of graves in Arlington Cemetery. Moreover, the white stars of prosperity and hope have faded and all American patriots that ever thought going to war in Vietnam was the right thing to do have too; they are no longer heroes. The understated title at the bottom of the poster praying to send our boys home describes what removing the color blue and the stars from the flag means to the artist, and leads our thoughts to war even if we had no idea when the poster was produced. The words, 'Send Our Boys Home', ring prayers of hopelessness and their message seems to be that the only solution to the war in Vietnam bringing our soldiers home. The text mentions nothing about victory or defeat; it does not seem to matter to the Gianakos at all. Just send our boys home.



The three posters presented in this essay are all anti-war posters; however, the poster art of the 1960s also included a call for arms. Not all Americans protested the U.S. soldiers' actions in Vietnam. It is important to remember that a land consisting of approximately 300 million different people is never in agreement. The view of the Vietnam War has changed over the years, which we clearly see in the design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the National Mall of Washington DC. Memories have grown darker and perceptions more critical, and most Americans

IP-seminar: Coming Together or Coming Apart? Europe and the U.S. in the 1960s

Copenhagen University, Professor Russell Duncan

Josefine Eckstrøm Lave

today have realized that the loss of 58,000 American men and women in the war was high. The fact that some realized it forty years ago is one of the reasons why the number stopped at 58,000; 'To us, the anti-war movement during the Vietnam Era is important not because it stopped the war, which it may or may not have done; rather it is important because it existed' (Zaroulis and Sullivan 1984, xi).

IP-seminar: Coming Together or Coming Apart? Europe and the U.S. in the 1960s
Copenhagen University, Professor Russell Duncan
Josefine Eckstrøm Lave

Bibliography

AIM. "AIM Report: Bob Kerrey's Useful Lie." *Accuracy In Media*. 15 Apr. 2001. Web. 11 Oct. 2011. <<http://www.aim.org/aim-report/aim-report-bob-kerreys-useful-lie/>>.

Baritz, Loren. *Backfire: a History of How American Culture Led Us into Vietnam and Made Us Fight the Way We Did*. New York: W. Morrow, 1985.

CBS. "Mike Wallace: A Lion In Winter - CBS News." *Breaking News Headlines: Business, Entertainment & World News - CBS News*. 11 Feb. 2009. Web. 11 Oct. 2011. <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/05/17/60minutes/main1625535_page3.shtml>.

Famous Pictures. "And Babies – Famous Pictures Magazine." 14 Apr. 2010. Web. 11 Oct. 2011. <http://www.famouspictures.org/mag/index.php?title=And_Babies>.

Freeman, Jo. "The Berkeley Free Speech Movement." *Jo Freeman: Feminist Scholar and Author*. Encyclopedia of American Social Movements (4 Vols) Edited by Immanuel Ness, Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2004, Pp. 1178-1182. Web. 11 Oct. 2011. <<http://www.jofreeman.com/sixtiesprotest/berkeley.htm>>.

Gitlin, Todd. *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*. Toronto: Bantam, 1987.

Hoff, James, and Miriam Katzeff. "Art Workers' Coalition : Primary Information." *Primary Information*. New York State Council on the Arts, 22 Sept. 2008. Web. 11 Oct. 2011. <<http://primaryinformation.org/index.php?/projects/art-workers-coalition/>>.

Mousse Magazine. "Magazine / Archive | MOUSSE CONTEMPORARY ART MAGAZINE." *Home | MOUSSE CONTEMPORARY ART MAGAZINE*. Sept. 2010. Web. 11 Oct. 2011. <<http://www.moussemagazine.it/articolo.mm?id=609>>.

PBS. "American Experience | PBS | Vietnam Online." *PBS: Public Broadcasting Service*. Public Broadcasting Service, 29 Mar. 2005. Web. 11 Oct. 2011. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/vietnam/trenches/my_lai.html>. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/twodays/peoplevents/e_napalm.html>

UC Berkeley Library Social Activism Sound Recording Project: Anti-Vietnam War Protests - San Francisco Bay Area. University of California, Berkeley. Web. 11 Oct. 2011. <<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/pacificviet.html>>.

Zaroulis, N. L., and Gerald Sullivan. *Who Spoke Up?: American Protest against the War in Vietnam, 1963-1975*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984.