



Shepard Fairey is a master of the art of phenomenon. Virtually every inhabitant of every major American city has seen an incarnation of his "Obey" posters and his memorable designs have been found on everything from movie posters to album and book covers. Recently, a series of posters that he made depicting Barack Obama utilizing a simple and striking red, white, and blue color palette have appeared around almost every corner in Los Angeles. The Obama campaign expressed their approval of these vibrant images, and Fairey's endorsement was seen as a potentially pivotal one for the Democratic nominee.

Fairey's exceptional career began in 1989 on the walls and street signs of Providence, where he was attending the Rhode Island School of Design. Using his own sketches and Kinko's printing services, he created a sticker proclaiming that "Andre the Giant Has a Posse," featuring an image of the famous French wrestler along with statistics of his height and weight. It was, Fairey says, "an experiment in phenomenology," meaning that he wanted to see what kind of reaction the ambiguous—and humorous—images would bring if they were found everywhere. Taking his cue from Marshall McLuhan's famous dictum that "The medium is the message," he posted his stickers on everything from brick walls to telephone poles. The world became his gallery. A sensation was being born.

By 1996, Fairey had streamlined the Andre image, juxtaposing a striking black and white image of Andre's face above a simple, bold imperative: "Obey." The result was something strongly reminiscent of the "Big Brother" described in George Orwell's 1984. With a bucket of wheat paste in hand and rolls of posters under his arm, Fairey proceeded to scale fire escapes and billboards far beyond Providence, pasting his images under the cover of night in select locations in cities all across America.

Soon it was almost impossible to turn around in cities such as New York and San Francisco without seeing Andre's somber face peering down. People in the streets asked, "Obey whom?" and "Obey what?" In fact, the image in itself meant nothing, and the "Obey" message itself was inspired by John Carpenter's *They Live*, a B-movie released in 1988. "My hope," Fairey said, "was that, in questioning what *Obey Giant* was about, the viewers would then begin to question all the images they are confronted with."

Fairey's fame spread like wildfire, fueled by a widespread love of his dynamic designs based on the work of early 20<sup>th</sup> century revolutionary propagandists. In 2005, Fairey was asked to create the movie poster for the Johnny Cash biopic *Walk the Line* along with numerous concert posters. His artwork has become a part of the permanent exhibitions in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. In 2008, Fairey created a limited edition lithograph of his friend Kobe Bryant—who considers Fairey his favorite artist—in celebration of Bryant's acquisition of the NBA Most Valuable Player award for 2007-2008.

In 2004, along with his friend Roger Gastman, Fairey founded a quarterly arts and culture magazine known as *Swindle*, which Fairey and Gastman have attempted to make as memorable and non-disposable as major art books. "It's kind of like my art," Fairey says, "where there's a range of styles and subject matter, from political topics to art, fashion, and humor."

Fairey is ambivalent about his influences, although he claims the propaganda poster work of Russian artist Alexander Rodchenko as an obvious basis for much of his work. He instead identifies the Sex Pistols, Black Flag, and Public Enemy as greater influences, believing that music is a much more engaging experience than art. "This harsh reality," Fairey says, "provides the challenge to make my art as much of an engaging, stimulating, provocative, visceral experience as possible."

It's a challenge that Fairey has answered with a virtuosic display of determination: his visions and accomplishments are nothing short of phenomenal.

