The Design of Dissent:
Graphic Design for Socio-Political Engagement

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Abstract

Design engages with the political and expresses resistance to hegemonic institutions and ideologies when it employs disruptive visual communication. In a context of contemporary visual communication, images often lack a theoretical and practical framework to create inquiry and social change. Informed by activism, visual rhetoric, political theory, and design criticism, this thesis offers strategies and practices for socio-political engagement by melding these approaches into the discipline of graphic design. This thesis makes the claim that graphic design's relationship with the public interest is one that should not be undervalued. It studies the implications of perception of graphic design work as a means of social change to demonstrate the efficacy of visual communication. This thesis asks designers to evaluate the way we as communicators and citizens express desires, beliefs, and critiques, demonstrating how contestational design exists as socio-political action.

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Background

Graphic design is a peculiar mix of pragmatism and idealism, individuals who choose to enter the field often take it for granted that the visual aspect of things can make a significant difference to the quality of life. In the 1920s, the Modernists believed that design has a fundamental task to perform as an agent of social and political transformation. In the decades after the Second World War, as graphic design took ashore as an organized business activity and as a would-be profession through the industrialized world, design's visual motivations and social purposes did not require much soul-searching…In a period of rapid industrial, economic and media growth, it could seem entirely positive to supply the business world with logos, liveries and literature to help ensure high visibility, a competitive presence, and climbing levels of profit. We have come a long way since then. The idea of design, preached with conviction by so many design missionaries from the 1950s to the 1980s, fell on receptive ears—and eyes—and almost everyone is a design convert of some kind now. Design is everywhere; its possibilities have been so thoroughly itemized, assimilated, and applied that it shapes almost everything we see and touch. Design is a means by which contemporary reality is structured, packaged, delivered to our doors, and imbued with unexciting air of rightness and normality.[1]
Rick Poynor, *Jan van Toorn: Critical Practice*

Graphic design's socio-political engagement has a lengthy historical tradition. Activism can be found in the work of individuals, organizations and studios such as the Situationist International, Grapus, and Experimental Jetset, publications such as *Colors Magazine* and *Emigre*, and the manifesto "First Things First" (1964, 2000). More recently, the repercussions of globalization, industrialization, neo-liberalism, post-structuralism, rapid technological advancement, and social media have led to a massive increase in social exchanges and mobility.[2] Today, activism is no longer confined to creative collectives or academic/political circles. Technology is easily accessible, allowing virtually anyone to engage in society as a designer, and its corollary, to be exposed to more information than ever before. The role of the viewer has also undergone a significant shift, as communication practices are no longer solely "a producer to consumer relationship"—"Postmodernism, like modernism and romanticism before it, fetishized [i.e. placed supreme importance on] the author, even when the author chose to indict or pretended to

[1] Rick Poynor, *Jan van Toorn: Critical Practice* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2008), 79.

[2] Nicolas Bourriaud, "Relational Aesthetics" in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (London: MIT Press, 2006), 160.

abolish him or herself. But the culture we have now fetishizes the recipient of the text to the degree that they become a partial or whole author of it."[3]

In response to these developments, recent years display a renewed interest in defining a socio-political practice in design. Exhibitions such as The Museum of Modern Art's *Design and Violence* (2013–2015) in New York City, *It's Not Very Nice That* (2014) at the Lighthouse in Glasgow, and *The Design of Dissent* (2016) at Non-Breaking Space in Seattle as well as conferences such as *The Politics of Design* in Belfast (2004), and *What Design Can Do* in Amsterdam (2016), among a wide array of growing literature and critique among designers further demonstrate the desire and demand for a critical practice. A number of theories and strategies have also been proposed in defining and creating frameworks through which to analyze and understand political activism and social engagement through graphic design. Such interest has created terms including *critical design*, *adversarial design*, *critical making*, *participatory design*, *sustainable design*, *social design*, and *tactical media*, as well as sister fields of political/activist art. These fields of interest demonstrate that designers have begun to develop substantial research, knowledge, and practice towards socio-political engagement through design.

While many of these theories provide a more precise method of evaluating political expressions through visual communication, they lack theoretical ground. Namely, what makes them effective and purposeful agents of social change, recognizing their limitations, identifying how they enact change, and defining what is meant by dissent or activism in visual communication. There are some perceptions of design work being rooted in problem-solving and when applied to complex socio-political situations, such a perspective may be somewhat naive. The nature of various socio-political struggles, shaped by cultural, economic, racial, and other factors may prove to be too complex for design to solve alone. Some socio-political issues are simply not problems *to solve* at all, but to pay attention to, become educated in, and mould towards a better future through engagement and awareness—and doing so is rarely simple or without conflict. Further, some attempts to categorize socio-political practice through design may become overly prescriptive, failing to capture the interdisciplinary nature of many design works and/or socio-political problems/ideologies. This leads categorizations to fall short of their intentions as works

[3] Alan Kirby, "The Death of Post Modernism and Beyond," *Philosophy Now*, no. 118 (2006), https://philosophynow.org/issues/58/The_Death_of_Postmodernism_And_Beyond.

operate more as exception rather than rule. The fastidious nature of political commentary through design is one that cannot be easily encapsulated into a blueprint for efficacy—nor should it be. The contextual needs of various issues as well as the demands of their respective medium are too varied and broad to do so. This thesis does not intend to set a bar for socio-political engagement, nor a rulebook for protest, nor to undermine the attempts made by fellow designers to unpack the fickle nature of politics and aesthetics.

Rather, this thesis recognizes the successes and common approaches of these theories, finding that what unifies all of these forms of design activism is the action of disruption. Through analysis of existing frameworks and approaches in visual rhetoric and political theory, as well as input from design history and critique, this thesis intends to position a form of design I deem to be contestational. Contestational design is here defined as an approach to graphic design that engages in political and social disruption to create inquiry. It differs from existing approaches by bridging the cultural production of meaning through visual rhetoric, democratic principles within political theory, and basis of activism into an inquiry based graphic design practice. This goal provides this thesis with two primary ways to foment disruption, (i) in a political dimension, using design to interrogate and challenge hegemonic structures and ideologies; and (ii) in a social dimension, embodying the potential of design work to be a catalyst for dialogue, inquiry, and social change. These lines of inquiry essentially become the logos, pathos, and ethos of design activism—logos, the argument of the work, pathos, reading and connection with the visual, and ethos, the appeal to action—ultimately bridging argument, perception, and engagement.

In order to establish contestational design practice and methods of socio-political engagement, this paper is organized into the following: first, I establish the function and typology of activism, recognizing how design is positioned as a means of engagement. I then discuss the operation of the visual rhetoric strategies of semiotics and psychoanalysis in order to define how images produce meaning, and how viewers ascribe meaning from them. Understanding perception and representation through these strategies identifies where and how visual communication can be subverted via contestational strategies. This study also establishes the social mediation of viewing images, placing

design in the context of culture and broader production of meaning. The power relations and social relationships mediated as a result of culture are defined through discussion of hegemony and political theory, primarily via the theory of agonism. This theory provides a basis for understanding social engagement in democratic society as well as the efficacy of conflict. The positive potentials of dissensus are then applied to graphic design for its ability to disturb existing patterns of representation, by creating dissenting forms and/or embodying dissenting ideologies. I then discuss the implications of a contestational design approach on the discipline of graphic design, as well as my reflections on how these ideas have been explored and investigated in my own visual research. By doing this, I present contestational design as a method of socio-political intervention and change. Ultimately, this thesis recognizes that contestational design practice has an important potential to fulfill through use of visual communication to subvert hegemonic socio-political structures, functioning in a heuristic way to facilitate dialogue, discussion, and dissensus.

Introduction

1.1 Activism

Portrayed vividly by every image coming out of Saturday's women's marches, there is an opportunity to address the tremendous value of all voices protesting for positive change in public and private sectors. We've demonstrated the positive impact that peaceful, yet insistent citizens have when we are actively involved in finance, healthcare, technology, government, voting, cities, education, and yes, design. The explosion of hand made posters, signs, pink hats, and broadly smiling faces reminds us that protest is visual, advocacy is a physical act, not just a social media opportunity, and that showing up always makes an impact.[4]
Ann Willoughby

Activism is, at its core, actioning one's dissatisfaction with a socio-political issue. Scholars of activism and social movements have marked that, "In many cases, people turn to protest and resistance because they don't have access to institutionalized power or because institutionalized channels for social change have led to a dead end."[5] When petitions and satisfaction with elected officials fall short, activism is a way for constituents to express their desires and frustration with not only a particular aspect of governance, but ideology itself. The turn to the use of design as activism becomes a natural progression as people use words and images to express themselves, physically manifesting their dissent in systems or contexts they feel otherwise unheard.

As explored by Ann Thorpe in *Defining Design Activism*, activism is generally considered to function in three ways, conventional activism (i.e. lobbying, social demonstrations, forming organizations, petitions, etc.); design elements of protest (signage, symbolic artifacts and identities, tools of protest, use of public space, etc); and critical architecture and design (activism through embedded ideology in a product, artifact, image, or structure).[6] While this is not an exhaustive description of how activism occurs as these categories often overlap, it provides a basis upon which to distinguish different forms of social engagement.

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[4] Quoted by Alan Thomas, "Signs, Signs," *Design Observer,* 25 January 2017, http://designobserver.com/feature/signs-signs/39492

[5] Ann Thorpe, "Defining Design as Activism" *Design Activism*, 2008, http://designactivism.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Thorpe-definingdesignactivism.pdf.

[6] Ibid.

In order to define a thorough understanding of activism through design, one must look directly towards the primary strategy of activism: "The disruption of regularly reproduced practices, systems and structures of institutionalized, or 'dominant' power"[7] in order to create social change. Thorpe presents four basic criteria used to define design as activism: (i) "it publicly reveals or frames a problem or challenging issue; (ii) it makes a contentious claim for change based on that problem or issue; (iii) it works on behalf of a neglected, excluded or disadvantaged group; [and/or] (iv) it disrupts routine practices, or systems of authority, which gives it the characteristic of being unconventional or unorthodox—outside traditional channels of change."[8] Thorpe's markers aid in determining what activist design aims to accomplish. The specific form design activism takes can vary greatly, and extend beyond traditional graphic design practices, from physical to digital to experiential. However, Thorpe's criteria fails to explain precisely how these acts occur. Revealing, claiming, working, and disrupting through design leads us to visual rhetoric.

1.2 Ways of Seeing

It is the viewers who make the paintings.[9]
Marcel Duchamp

Whether an image has a specific intended meaning or not, the reading of a visual experience is the basis of all graphic communication. While the processes and thought patterns that encompass this experience are simultaneous, fleeting, and come to a viewer subconsciously, the factors that create perception are governed by a number of constructed meanings and paired associations. The ability for design practice to effectively function as activism first requires an understanding of this production of meaning, studied through the lens of visual rhetoric. In this research, visual rhetoric will be studied through semiotics and psychoanalysis. These frameworks provide a breakdown of precisely how images work, how we see, how we derive meaning from images, and consequently, how ideology is thus mediated by perception of

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Quoted by Nicolas Bourriaud, *Post Production: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World,* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002), 10.

visual communication. With this foundation, designers can be fully informed of how socio-political ideology operates via design. To begin this exploration, we must begin at the root: perception itself.

Semiotics, a linguistic theory introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure, established a synchronic understanding of language based upon the notion of signs, rooted in the pairing of "A word (or signifier) and the concept it refers to (the signified)."[10] Semiotics established that signified meaning shifts over time and context, and is derived not from a direct relationship with a sign, but according to its relationship with other signified meanings within a broader system of language. The application of semiotics to visual communication was furthered by Roland Barthes, who "sought to analyze how the meanings we attribute to images are not self-evident and universal in how we understand what we see."[11] Barthes developed a methodology for deconstructing images via three levels of meaning: (i) linguistic (the text in or accompanying a composition); (ii) coded iconic (denotative, literal composition and its parts); and (iii) non-coded iconic (connotative mythology or meaning of the image and its parts).[12] Dividing images into these three planes aids in breaking down precisely where and how meaning is generated. Accompanying text tends to guide the viewer towards a particular intended meaning, and the literal meaning of forms guides immediate recognition, and thus, mythological association.

Connotation, or mythology, describes how the intended meaning of an image is not necessarily guaranteed. Barthes noted that recognition and comprehension of image/text are shaped by a viewer's visual and linguistic literacy, culture, ideology, and audiencing. To Barthes, mythology "is a form of representation that works to express, and more or less invisibly, to justify the dominant values of a culture in a particular historical moment."[13] The ability for multiple viewers to engage with a work and derive a somewhat consistent and shared meaning is determined by "a community of readers who share a broad collection of cultural references, and the broader system of social relations that determines not only what has meaning in a culture, but also who gets to say what, under what circumstances, and with

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[10] Susie O'Brien and Imre Szeman, *Popular Culture: A User's Guide, 2nd ed.* (Toronto: Nelson Education Limited, 2010), 73.

[11] Brian Curtin, "Semiotics and Visual Representation," *International Program in Design and Architecture,* n.d., arch.chula.ac.th/journal/files/article/lJjpgMx2iiSun103202.pdf

[12] Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 154.

[13] O'Brien and Szeman, *Popular Culture: A User's Guide*, 74.

what social effects."[14] This common domain of meaning forms ideologies, shared senses of social, visual, and linguistic relations that determine what means what to whom in what context. Ultimately, De Saussure and Barthes' understanding of the reflexivity of representation demonstrate that, "The significance of image or objects is not understood as a one-way process from image or object to the individual, but the result of complex interrelationships between the individual, the image, or the object and other factors such as culture and society."[15] Another crucial element of their studies is the emphasis placed upon the power relations that result from representation. To create form, and thus, to ascribe meaning, gives the creator the powerful task of determining how something (or someone) is going to be perceived, what language or emotions will be used to describe them, and within which context they are viewed.

The level of meaning introduced by the individual is further explored by the notion of psychoanalysis, a theory first developed by Sigmund Freud. Following Freud, Gillian Rose recognizes not only the image, but the viewer as a site of meaning.[16] Psychoanalysis places emphasis on the gaze of the viewer, recognizing the potential irrationalities of viewing and the power of emotional responses. Doing so marks how viewing operates on a partially subconscious level. The subconscious is formed by the permissions of a culture, its prohibitions, traditions, and taboos, as well as personal experience. It is an aspect of identity that constantly shapes and reshapes subjectivity throughout our lives.[17] Rose, following Lacan, states that, "We learn to see in particular ways, and this is a process that is reiterated every time we look."[18] The images and visual experiences we encounter on a daily basis suggest particular subjectivities and cultural attitudes that, through their viewing, impact our own senses of subjectivity, and thus, our way of seeing. As semiotics has taught us, meaning is in constant flux, shifting and reshaping itself in systematic ways, and the same is true of subjectivity. Never final or fully achieved, it is constantly reiterated by different sites of meaning.[19] Thus, neither the self nor broader socio-

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[14] Ibid., 76.

[15] Curtin, 51.

[16] Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials 2nd ed.* (London: Sage, 2007), 102.

[17] Ibid., 104.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

political contexts are entirely fixed. Rather, they are constantly interrogated and mediated by images, reinventing or re-evaluating themselves to the systems of representation that govern them.

Seeing is also mediated by context, as all contexts "have their own economics, their own disciplines, their own rules for how their particular sort of spectator should behave, including whether and how they should look, and all these affect how a particular image is seen."[20] Rose emphasizes the impact of context on deriving meaning, as different spaces demand different responses.[21] The paste-up flyer on a light post will naturally incur different emotions, associations, and judgements than the professionally printed and attractively displayed advertisement. In this way, we are reminded of the implied authority of a work based on how it is encountered, as certain images are read as more legitimate than others. Moreover, digital media allows us to encounter images in a space devoid of material context, as here, only the digital device itself and the way the image is presented on the screen are fixed points of experience.

1.3 Ways of Reacting

He is quick, thinking in clear images;
I am slow, thinking in broken images.
He becomes dull, trusting to his clear images;
I become sharp, mistrusting my broken images,
Trusting his images, he assumes their relevance;
Mistrusting my images, I question their relevance.
Assuming their relevance, he assumes the fact,
Questioning their relevance, I question the fact.
…
He in a new confusion of his understanding;
I in a new understanding of my confusion.[22]
Robert Graves, *In Broken Images*

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[20] Ibid., 11.

[21] Ibid., 23.

[22] Robert Graves, "In Broken Images," in *Seeing is Believing: The Politics of the Image,* edited by Rod Stoneman, (London: Blackdog Publishing, 2013), 186.

Dissection of semiotics and psychoanalysis equips designers to not only interrogate and reshape the meaning of design work and the discipline as a whole, but also to understand precisely where and how to subvert these very sites of production in their own work. Semiotics and psychoanalysis allow us to determine that the meaning of an image and its reception by the viewer are shaped and mediated by perception. The literal, denotated, and connotated meaning of a visual experience is partially read through one's subjectivity, the socially, culturally, and politically constructed (and often subconscious) thought processes and gaze of a viewer. These approaches provide designers with the following basic tenets of representation: (i) meaning, through language and form, is derived from constantly evolving broader systems of meanings; (ii) meaning is (to a degree) arbitrary and dependent on a number of factors in its audience, context, environment, etc.; (iii) representation creates systems of power and frameworks for how particular subjects are expressed or spoken about; (iv) complex social identities (on individual and collective levels) are mediated in part by visual communication; (v) images suggest, embody, and reflect behaviour through the ideologies and views they present; (vi) the shared domain of meaning in a culture or society constitute the base level of an image's meaning and form culture; and (vii) there are unaccountable subjectivities brought to an image by the viewer that will impact its meaning. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall, as quoted by Rose, summarizes these lessons in the following passage,

> What is seen—the image and its meaning—is understood not as eternally fixed, but relative to and implicated in the positions and schemes of interpretation which are brought to bear upon it. Visual discourses already have possible positions of interpretation (from which they 'make sense') embedded in them, and the subjects bring their own subjective desires and capacities to the 'text' which enable them to take up positions of identification in relation to its meaning.[23]

In this way, subjectivity provides a basis for understanding how one is able to connect with visual communication on an individual, personal level. Through engaging one's subjectivity, visual communication is proven to be an act that is not performed by the designer alone, as viewers bring the work into culture by engaging with it, imbuing the image with what is and always will be missing from it—a response. In this way, any form of visual communication is only "complete" when it is perceived. In

[23] Rose, 310.

a contemporary context, where images and information are rapidly consumed, reacted to, repackaged, and represented, visual literacy becomes a very active act of engagement. Philosopher Gianni Vattimo explains, "The rapid consumption of symbols, which is conditioned by sociological factors like the power of mass communication, forces the art market to constantly introduce new products, symbols, and mythologies. But precisely because of their rapid succession, it is necessary to mediate these new symbols, so that they can be accepted and generally understood on the vast scale by common consciousness."[24] Therefore, it is not enough to only speak with new forms and constantly produce and reinvent design practice ad nauseum. Symbols, forms, and graphic languages must be studied, understood, and recognized for what meanings they put forth into the world.

With these understandings in mind, designers may begin to define precisely how these aspects of representation can be subverted and shifted in order to challenge the ideas they promote. These notions also emphasize the limits of visual rhetoric as well, as "the assumption that viewing 'good' images will lead to 'good' behaviour rests on a simplistic understanding of how pedagogy, or the process of teaching and learning, operates. The meanings we take from cultural texts come from a combination of convention…and individual subjectivity and experience. What we do with these interpretations is also influenced by those diverse factors.[25]" Also, the ability for a viewer to discern associations, concepts, and meanings from visual communication, let alone act on them, in the words of graphic designer Wim Crouwel, "Supposes a certain knowledge of that specific picture material and its meaning, and a certain training in interpreting texts."[26] Although a greater exposure to cross-cultural imagery, symbols, mythologies, and ideologies via globalization and the internet suggests a growth in visual literacy in recent decades, one cannot assume that a reader will be equipped with the visual, linguistic, or critical knowledge necessary to unpack a particular socio-political message from a particular work. In his monograph of Jan van Toorn's work, Rick Poynor explains that specialized communications are targeted towards "minority audiences…that already possess a sophisticated level of visual understanding. These audiences are not, in that sense, average viewers. Van Toorn's conception of reflexive design places a

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[24] Gianni Vattimo, *Art's Claim to Truth* (New York: Columbia University Press: 2008), 36.

[25] O'Brien and Szeman, 98.

[26] Quoted in Poynor, 108–109.

great deal of faith in people's willingness and ability to interpret complex graphic signals that might, in practice, baffle them or pass them by."[27] In order words, you can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make him drink.

While such limits to understanding and reading images exist throughout the arts and design, they are of special importance in socio-political contexts. Designers must be aware that their audience may not be fully informed with the scope and detail of the issue at hand, nor its existing visual or linguistic discourse. When choice of colour, composition, and especially of symbolic meaning correspond with very real social and political implications, the stakes in creating effective and ethical communication become higher. However, such consequences and limits of meaning are not only limited to the viewer's literacy, as the designer must also be aware of how they choose to visually manifest their concepts. This point is of particular importance to Ruben Pater, who, in *The Politics of Design,* argues that design elements and principles are socially and politically contentious. Pater provides a thorough discussion of forms and their implications through analysis and case studies in language and typography, colour and contrast, image and photography, symbols and icons, and information graphics. The author cites examples such as how the reading of left to right in the West implies a temporal linearity to images that may not necessarily translate in cultures with scripts that read in other directions.[28] Examples such as this highlight how even graphic cues that may feel innate, such as implied sequence, can be socially and culturally constructed. The author also highlights the potentially radically unintended consequences of design decisions. Pater cites an example of food rations that were dropped over Afghanistan in 2001, where the colour, size, and typography of the artifact was strikingly similar to cluster bombs being dropped at the same time in the region.[29] Through examples such as these, Pater emphasizes the importance of research, sensitivity, and contextual awareness when designing socio-political artifacts. Although this may suggest a futility to socio-political representation, such sensitivities give designers valuable lessons to consider. Such lessons include but are not limited to, (i) being aware of an audience; (ii) being aware of the cross cultural implications and potential misinterpretations of one's work; and

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[27] Ibid.

[28] Ruben Pater, *The Politics of Design: A (Not So) Global Manual for Visual Communication* (Amsterdam: BIS Publishers, 2016), 145.

[29] Ibid., 72.

(iii) being aware of how self referential the messages in one's work may be. With this in mind, there will always be shortcomings to communication, and not every message needs or wants to be universal, as "It's a mistake to ask a work of art to be all things to all people."[30] However, an awareness of these aspects of representation allows designers to maximize and fine tune their desired scope of reach and retain clarity in their intended message.

2.1 Where Does Design Happen

Graphic design's mode of access to the individual is the contingency. Humans wander through space-time, whether of the city or the printed page—where the graphic messages of the visuals appear. They encounter them, accept them, or reject them. On that contingency is based all the talent of the creative person, that user of fleeting moments, salvager of an interstitial availability of the individual in the spaces and times in which he or she acts and lives.[31]

Abraham A. Moles, *The Legibility of the World: A Project of Graphic Design*

But where does this production of meaning ultimately take place? Where does the discipline of graphic design locate itself? How is the infinitely broad spectrum of visual communication given place? To answer these questions we turn to the notion of culture. For the purposes of this research, a definition of culture is taken from Stuart Hall as follows,

> Culture, it is argued, is not so much a set of things—novels and paintings or TV programmes or comics—as a process, a set of practices. Primarily, culture is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings…between the members of a society or group... Thus culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is around them, and 'making sense' of the world, in broadly similar ways.[32]

Understanding of culture is further underpinned in writer and theorist Guy Debord's exploration of the term *spectacle*. Debord states that it is "the sector which concentrates all gazing and all consciousness… The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images."[33] Recognizing the social relation that culture is responsible for positions visual communication to be

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30 David Salle, *How to See* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016), 27–8.

31 Abraham A. Moles, "The Legibility of the World: A Project of Graphic Design," *Design Issues* 3, no. 1 (1986): 46, http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/stable/1571640

32 Quoted in Rose, 1–2.

33 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1970), 2–3.

precisely that which governs and creates meaning. This relationship exists on not only an individual level between image and viewer, but on a collective level, as the amalgamation of images to a particular viewer and to bodies of viewers. The result of these relationships sits not in the direct correspondence between image and viewer, but in the social and psychological connections the act of viewing results in. To gaze, reflect, and come to a conclusion thus becomes an inherently social process. Viewers share their feelings of unity and/or opposition with other viewers, finding those who see things in images similarly or in direct opposition to them, forming organized or implicit groups and identities as a result. In this way, culture becomes the social process of making sense of meaning embedded in visual experience. It is in this social relation where activism takes root. The socio-political actions taken by designers and citizens alike exist as a way to penetrate and disrupt the social mediation of meaning in culture through positioning alternative visual and linguistic messages that speak to an individual or collective critique, opposition, or support of particular issues. Recognizing the social function of culture is crucial as it reminds us that, "Culture is concerned not just with individual tastes and desires, but also with the fundamental organization of society—with the distribution of material and symbolic power. Culture both reflects and influences social organization and the distribution of power."[34] This line of inquiry leads us to a consideration of precisely what is meant when one speaks of power, the political, and social organization.

In "Criticism and the Politics of Absence," author Anne Bush provides historical context for how contemporary culture has come to be, providing a basis for hegemony and the role of critique in democratic society. Bush traces this lineage back to the 17th and 18th centuries, where the view of criticism as a dialogue within a consensual public body was born via the,

> Intersection of the critic and the public sphere… and emerged as a 'theatre of exchange' within a discursive public arena. Supported by the technological possibilities of an industrialized printing trade, criticism was a kind of democratic dialogue, published in periodicals and mediated by discussion in public houses. Unlike contemporary criticism that is specific to the issues of a discipline, criticism at the beginning of the industrial revolution was based on popular consensus and addressed the cultural and social questions of the day.[35]

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[34] O'Brien and Szeman, 74.

[35] Anne Bush, "Criticism and the Politics of Absence," *Emigre* no. 36, Fall 1995, 6.

Here, the supposed rationality of open public dialogue in a democracy "was trained by the autocratic echoes of a ruling voice, an enunciation that was white, male, and privileged."[36] By recognizing rationality as existing in this particular demographic voice, all those who did not share their experiences, values, or identity were exulted from participation, instead creating "a hegemonic centre from which the economic interests of the industrial elite were instituted under the guise of popular consent."[37] These are the roots of contemporary notions of culture. Today, the massive impact of post-structuralism, advertising, technological innovation, social activism, and Post-War ideology of the mid-twentieth century has manifested in a new sense of reality. From this time on, "The only universal, communal experience that existed was created by the media, a spectacle designed to promote private interests and to neutralize individual choice. It was a constructed reality."[38] This basis for hegemony is critical in understanding the nature of power. DiSalvo describes hegemony as a network of interactions, conditions, and institutions that are in constant motion and negotiation, both under and exerting pressure over time,[39] as dominant interests and dominant groups evolve and change. This dynamic understanding of hegemony suggests that activism is not a matter of entirely overcoming a dominant interest, but rather, participation in an ongoing process of revealing, documenting, and challenging current hegemonic practices. This identification of the roots of hegemonic forces helps "people discover and label sites and themes of contention in the political landscape"[40] and also recognize hegemony itself as social construction. In turn, sites and themes of contention become points of entry, allowing behaviours and phenomena to be named, studied, and interrogated.

Philosopher Michel Foucault provides further support in how one may challenge hegemonic structures. In "The Subject and Power," Foucault advocates for critique of "power relations through the antagonism of strategies."[41] Via contestational strategies, design can be used as a way to not only express

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[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid., 8.

[39] DiSalvo, 35.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 780. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343197

the desires, thoughts, and beliefs of a particular marginalized group or interest, but also a critique of the governing structures that creates the conditions for such struggles. The identification of these sites of interest is the first step in engaging in any form of activist critique. As quoted by DiSalvo, political theorist Chantal Mouffe states, "Mobilization requires politicization, but politicizing cannot exist without the production of a conflictual representation of the world, with opposed claims, with which people can identify, thereby allowing for passions to be mobilized within the spectrum of the democratic process."[42] Thus, design is situated as precisely that which produces, represents, claims, and mobilizes, through being a site of engagement that people can identify with.

2.2 Politics and the Political

Doing art means displacing art's borders, just as doing politics means displacing the borders of what is acknowledged as the political.[43]

Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*

To further understand the nature of socio-political engagement, we must make a distinction between the terms *politics* and *the political,* which locate hegemony in specific actions, places, and behaviours. While often used interchangeably, Mouffe describes how distinguishing these terms "emphasizes the difference between ongoing acts of contestation and the administrative operations of government."[44] Mouffe describes *politics* as the collection of practices, institutions, and mechanisms that establish order and organization over human life.[45] Politics may take a variety of forms, "From laws and regulations to unspoken but obsessed habits of interpersonal interaction and performances of beliefs and values."[46] These forms and behaviours take place within institutions such as states, municipalities, or organizations. *The political,* however, is the social condition of politics. The political is expressed and experienced through interactions between people and organizations, "In a multiplicity of ways, including debate, dissensus, and protest."[47] Essentially, the political is the conflict inherent to human interaction.

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[42] DiSalvo, 53–54.

[43] Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 157.

[44] DiSalvo, 7–8.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid., 8.

[47] Ibid.

Mouffe elaborates on the importance and meaning of this inherent conflict in *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*. Here, the author discusses agonism, a political theory that recognizes conflict as inevitable in society and fundamental to democracy. Most importantly, agonism places value in the potentially positive repercussions of conflict. In *The Democratic Paradox,* Mouffe states that democracy "creates a space in which this confrontation is kept open, power relations are always being put into question and no victory can be final."[48] This ongoing contestation and reflexivity harkens back strongly to the circularity of semiotics, psychoanalysis, and culture. In all of these sites, theories, and means of inquiry, the inherent incompleteness of a process is taken to be a positive aspect, as it allows for understanding and meaning to always grow and stay in constant motion. Nothing is considered absolute or precious, and thus, can always change. The text goes into detail regarding tension in politics, accepting that consensus in society is not only impossible, but a misunderstanding of democracy itself. The ability for a society to grow and better itself requires that there be a gap to close, an imagined future that is always on the horizon. To believe that a society has reached consensus only marks the exclusion of those outside of its borders of consideration, and thus, is no longer democratic. From an agonistic perspective, to engage in a democratic society means to question, examine, and challenge. In order to participate in these actions, spaces of confrontation and sites of contestation have to exist. This is the space in which design operates, as design provides a way to give form to conflict, and thus, the political.

2.3 The Democracy of the Object

By the mid-twentieth century, the only universal, communal experience that existed was created by the media, a spectacle designed to promote private interests and to neutralize individual choice. It was a constructed reality, a (re)presentation that 'Constantly ingested or eradicated the objects it supposedly proffered, forcing them to hover in an unelectable space…a supreme fiction.'[49]
Anne Bush, *Criticism and the Politics of Absence*, Emigre no. 36

The theory of agonism was applied to graphic design in Carl DiSalvo's text *Adversarial Design.* Here, DiSalvo identifies *objects* as adversarial agents rather than people. DiSalvo explains, "In labelling

[48] Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso Books, 2000), 15.

[49] Bush, 8.

an object as adversarial, I mean to call attention to…the way [an object] expresses dissensus…[by enabling or modelling] the productive and ongoing questioning, challenging, and reframing that typifies agonism."[50] This notion of objects as sites of inquiry is further developed by scholar Bruno Latour's notion of an *object-oriented democracy.* According to Latour, objects "become a means and medium through which politics and the political are enacted."[51] The meaning of objects and the way they are encountered is determined by their relation to other objects, discourses, and social relations, offering an inquiry into political conditions that is also in constant motion.[52] The creation of form characterized by adversarial design is championed by DiSalvo as "something literally to point at with regard to the political condition."[53] Similar attitudes are also expressed by Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, proponents of a perspective deemed "critical design." The authors designate two overarching categories of design practice: critical and affirmative design. The latter affirms the status quo and conforms to hegemonic expectations across culture and society, whereas the former rejects existing ways of being and provide critique of hegemony through alternative values.[54] Regardless of category, Dunne and Raby deem all design to be ideological. The authors recognize the benefits design practice has in being a site of critical inquiry as the field is directly between mass communication and consumption, making it a direct point of engagement.[55] However, dominant notions of design practice and purpose continue to be found in providing services and products, championing answers and efficiency over a more reflexive, open-ended critical discourse. Notions such as adversarial and critical design are important to this research as they recognize the complexity inherent to visually manifesting socio-political struggle, and positioning design as a socio-political agent. However, their discussions are focused on particular contexts, primarily robotics and industrial design. While certainly effective as tactile, mechanical, and three-dimensional interactions, this research recognizes the socio-political dimension inherent to *all* forms of graphic design.

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[50] DiSalvo, 7.

[51] Ibid., 23–24.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid., 117.

[54] Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, "Designer as Author" in *Design Act: Socially and Politically Engaged Design Today—Critical Roles and Emerging Tactics,* ed. Magnus Ericson and Ramia Mazé (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011), 28.

[55] Ibid.

Further, DiSalvo's writing also acknowledges the problematic role of designer as translator, where the designer (consciously or unconsciously) acts as speaker for a group, potentially one which they are not a part of. In socio-political contexts, this can have particularly problematic results. Designers need to maintain an awareness of the methods and implications of their communication, conscious of the agency they imply towards a topic or group of people with their work. To speak socially and politically creates an ethical dimension, to use one's platform and voice in a just and equitable way.

Most importantly, the notion of design giving form to political conditions is imperative to activist design work. Through engaging in agonism with design, designers create works that "prompt recognition of political issues and relations, express dissensus, and enable contestational claims and arguments."[56] Through making knowledge and information accessible, known, and physically (or digitally/experientially) manifest, designers engage in a process of articulation. Designers go through processes of collecting and making sense of information about a particular topic, translating or editing that information into a visual form, and thus, creating connections between spaces, ideas, and people. This process provides the viewer with a visual experience that turns them into not only the consumer of a visual experience, but "a politicized actor.... Through the design of agonistic collectives, one can begin to envisage ways in which users are not only witnesses to adversarial design but also participants in doing the work of agonism."[57]

3.1 Dissensus

It is a matter of making films politically; it is not a matter of making political films.[58]
Jean-Luc Godard

How exactly does a designer participate in agonism? How does design become engaged in activism? What do subversion, contestation, and dissent mean in a visual sense? To answer these questions one must return to semiotics and psychoanalysis. To break from existing means of representation and meaning, one must break with their very operation. To dissent, subvert, or challenge a way of

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[56] Carl DiSalvo, *Adversarial Design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 12.

[57] Ibid., 114.

[58] Thomas Hirschhorn, "Making Art Politically: What Does this Mean?" *Art & Research* 3, no. 1 (2009/10). http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v3n1/fullap01.html

articulating or representing something requires disrupting an aspect of how meaning is typically conveyed. In *Seeing is Believing: The Politics of the Visual,* Rod Stonemason elaborates, "Fissures in the sign are opened through the disruptive practices of the avant-garde, experimental texts that do not submit to the probable or the realistic."[59] Contestational visual communication engages in this very "fissure of signs" by presenting alternative ways of making, of speaking, and of making sense. By creating contestational works, in the words of philosopher Jacques Rancière, design contributes "to the new constitution of a form of commonsense that is 'polemical,' to a new landscape of the visible, the sayable, and the doable."[60] Through bringing lesser known, often complex, and sidelined interests of marginalized or otherwise suppressed or neglected groups to the fore, visual communication moves dissenting interests into visible culture, and thus, makes it known and accessible. Embodying alternative thoughts, offering alternative forms, and advocating for alternative interests provides an interrogation and challenge of hegemonic representation and interest. However, when engaging in contestational design, one must also interrogate one's own approach, recognizing what elements of a design language risk reaffirming, contradicting, or aestheticizing that which one seeks to disrupt. In *The Ends of Man*, philosopher Jacques Derrida warns of how without sensitivity in one's approach, engaging in dissensus against an institution, belief, or power may replace it with another version of itself. The author describes that, "Without changing terrain, by repeating what is implicit in the founding concepts and the original problematic…one risks ceaselessly confirming, consolidating, relifting (relever), at an always more certain depth, that which one allegedly deconstructs."[61] In order to avoid this trap, Derrida advocates "to change terrain, in a discontinuous and irruptive fashion…thereby inhabiting more naively and strictly than ever the inside one declares one has deserted."[62]

But what does this actually look like? What strategies can designers use to embody and present contestational ideas? How can a designer's theoretical approach match the ideology in their choice of form? One method for doing so is found in visual metaphor and satire. Indirectly speaking of socio-

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[59] Rod Stoneman, *Seeing is Believing: The Politics of the Visual* (London: Blackdog Publishing, 2013), 179.

[60] Rancière, 149.

[61] Jacques Derrida, "The Ends of Man," in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1972), 135.

[62] Ibid.

political issues or using humour to challenge them provides an opening for inquiry as images are not taken to be blatantly ideological. This strategy was most prominently used in Poland during Communist rule, where all published works (i.e. books, flyers, posters, etc.) were required to go through a censorship board. Polish gallery owner, collector, and critic Krzysztof Dydo describes how "Censors were very strict to make sure everything was in compliance with ideals and principles. With cultural posters, artists tried to trick the censors with either satire or something that was subversive."[63] The censorship board forced Polish designers to imbue their works with subliminal or implicit messages without making directly political statements that would prevent their work from being published. In the words of Mieczysław Gorowski, "We wanted our posters to be seen by the public, we were obliged to comply with the expectations in the first layer of meaning. But each of us tried to smuggle in some undertones."[64] Designer Rafał Olbiński discusses how in this climate, design served a dual role, to inform, and for the viewer who was prepared to understand it, to dissent via its connotative meaning, "to make fun of authorities or sneak some kind of forbidden truth about something."[65] Designer Filip Pagowski discusses the benefit of this challenge on Polish culture, as "the power of the images, without a direct political statement, that something like this is able to exist in a country that is supposed to be controlled and censored … that had more impact than pure politics."[66] The limits placed on Polish culture at the time created a climate in which visual dissent was the only channel to truly interrogate one's surroundings in a public way. Having to represent things indirectly led to the development of a national tradition of visual communication using metaphor, satire, and surrealism. Polish designers utilized visual representation as an interrogation into not only their oppressive surroundings, but the very way they chose to communicate their beliefs. This interrogation is especially crucial in political contexts such as this, as artists, designers, writers, and fellow creative minds were heavily controlled and targeted by hegemonic forces. Here, the very presence of a dissenting form becomes an act of resistance and defiance in itself.

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[63] *Freedom on the Fence*, directed by Glenn Holsten and Andrea Marks (Portland: Film Baby, 2009), DVD.

[64] Ibid.

[65] ibid.

[66] ibid.

Another common visual strategy for contestational communication is found in alienation, the process of making something familiar seem new or strange. Russian critic Victor Shklyovsky, as quoted by Rick Poynor, recognized that "the purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known…The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged."[67] Shklyovsky's interpretation emphasizes the effect of visual communication rather than its form, advocating for an experience that leaves the viewer questioning what they are witnessing, how they are encountering it, and what they think of it.

This was a strategy well embraced by German playwright Bertolt Brecht. His application of alienation to theatre was rooted in a desire to treat the events of the play with critical distance, not wanting his audience to get swept up in the emotion of a scene. Instead, he kept his audience at arm's length from the experience of the play to "see the characters as particular to their contexts with choices in how they respond to their circumstances,"[68] rather than taking them and their decisions for granted, ultimately treating the human being as an object of inquiry.[69] By having his actors perform in this way, Brecht wishes to emphasize that every choice was exactly that—a choice, "it is important to see that the world in which these characters live is not inevitable or a natural social given, but instead, it is a construct."[70] Forcing viewers to see events and behaviours as constructed decisions exposes that the world is essentially composed of a series of decisions, and thus, nothing in it is necessarily inevitable, change can occur simply by making a different choice.

Exposing the nature of one's own construction, of an object's construction, or of an ideology's construction effectively critiques it and interrogates it not by countering it with an alternative, but making it explain, expose, or reveal its own nature. In visual communication, this often manifests as re-contextualizing or appropriating forms. Placing forms, symbols, or experiences outside of their familiar contexts and using them in new ways instantly provides work with critique of its own parts. Overall,

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[67] Quoted in Poynor, 95.

[68] Suzie Martin, "Brecht's Alienation Effect," in *Curious Arts*, February 13, 2015, http://www.curiousarts.ca/alienation-effect.

[69] Poynor, 96.

[70] Martin.

these methods are not an exhaustive list of strategies that designers must use in order to engage in contestation. Rather, they provide a basis from which to begin, and an understanding of how they operate. The nature of being contestational is, by its very definition, one that is subject to context and time. A strategy that may be contestational in one instance may not accomplish the same things in another, nor at a different time. This fickle nature is not a shortfall, as it simply embodies the very essence of representation, requiring designers and activists to constantly interrogate and change their own means of engagement, critiquing themselves along with the rest of their environments. In the midst of this ambiguity, remains a clear and simple goal: make people pay attention. As philosopher Gianni Vattimo describes, "A failed work is not even an object of discourse, since it does not give rise to or open onto a dialogue."[71] What is truly valuable in visual communication is its ability to spur dialogue and engagement. Not merely for the sake of a conversation or controversy, but to focus attention in a constructive way. In so doing, one affirms that "The value of a work consists in its prophecy of a new world...to read the artwork as...a point of departure rather than a point of arrival."[72]

3.2 Inquiry and Synecdoche

Giselle Levy: *That's Jackson Pollock.*
Susan Delacorte: *In a word.*
Connie Baker: *I was just getting used to the idea of dead, maggoty meat being art. Now this?*
Susan Delacorte: *Please don't tell me we have to write a paper about it.*
Katherine Watson: *Do me a favor. Do yourselves a favor. Stop talking, and look. You're not required to write a paper. You're not even required to like it. You are required to consider it.*[73]
Mona Lisa Smile (2003)

How do these strategies motivate action? Does engaging in agonistic or contestational design work truly result in any social change? The first function of engaging in this kind of design work is simply the articulation of information. By making things accessible, known, and visible, design broadens the scope of cultural discussion and consideration. The emotional response of a viewer via the questioning of

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71 Vattimo, 54.

72 Ibid., 54–55.

73 *Mona Lisa Smile*, directed by Mike Newell (New York: Revolution Studios, 2003), DVD.

ideologies and information creates the sensation of inquiry, a feeling that is of utmost importance when engaging in socio-political action. For philosopher John Dewey, as described by DiSalvo, inquiry is defined as a process that transforms complex, indeterminate situations into clarified ones, and thus, enables action through improved understanding.[74] To elicit such a reaction from one's viewer demonstrates the success of a design artifact, having lead the viewer to engage with what a work wishes to say, or what questions it wishes to rouse, gaining a response and desire in return.

This desire to lead viewers to particular thoughts and feelings from work leads this paper to the notion of synecdoche, "A figure of thought that finds the inherent relationships, equivalences and felt connections between things and experiences. Synecdochic relationships reveal and clarify meaning by a clever and often surprising series of mental substitutions that link together seemingly unrelated phenomena and sensory information."[75] This term is especially relevant when considering the communication of ideology through graphic design. While ideology is not necessarily consciously communicated, or perceived as ideological by the designer producing the work, use of contestational strategies to complex issues (such as socio-political struggle) may bear synecdochic understanding through design.

In any piece of design work, the ideas and connections brought together by the designer, as well as their representation through visual metaphor and symbols demonstrates a melding of relationships and thoughts. Synecdoche further merges notions of semiotics and psychoanalysis as it embraces the subjectivity viewers bring to visual experiences as precisely that which links together the ideas the work wishes to communicate. In this way, work is considered complete or successful only once its meaning manifests and is expressed in the mind of the viewer. Through doing so, synecdoche brings about "novel discovery which uncovers new relationships and finds non-obvious connections of significance."[76] Novel discovery is significant here as finding one's own discoveries in a work is also what differentiates graphic design work from propaganda. Synecdoche effectively becomes the goal for contestational design engagement. Rancière describes the role of the visual communicator as one,

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[74] DiSalvo, 115–116.

[75] Marti Louw, "Designing for Delight," May 14, 2003, http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~illah//PAPERS/DesigningForDelight.pdf, 14.

[76] Ibid.

> whose strategies aim to change the frames, speeds, and scales according to which we perceive the visible, and combine it with a specific invisible element and a specific meaning. Such strategies are intended to make the invisible visible or to question the self-evidence of the visible; to rupture given relations between things and meanings and, inversely, to invent novel relationships between things and meanings that were previously unrelated.[77]

This process of offering something for consideration creates an interrogation into representation, questioning that which is taken for granted. Inquiry also supports an open-endedness to design work, as to question things and ideas that exist beyond the borders of the page state that the design is not complete in itself. In the words of designer Jan van Toorn, "If you strive for a closed message, both in form and in content, then you are not being true to the communicative character of the message, to the real aim of the communication. Producers of information try to hide their real aims and motives. Information becomes a commodity. Design is the ultimate answer to that."[78]

3.3 Critical Practice

There is a notion of idealism which today is seldom discussed, and which simply defines the future as: "not yet."[79]
Ernst Bloch

On a broader scale, contestational design practice is also an inquiry into the very discipline of graphic design. Often considered the intermediary between corporate interest and the consumer, design is perfectly situated to critique cultural value and the ethics of consumerism. However, in order to do so effectively, "Designers will need to develop new communication strategies and move from narratives of production to narratives of consumption, or the aesthetics of use. That is, they will have to shift emphasis from the object and demonstrating its feasibility to the experiences it can offer."[80] Through contestational design practice, the profession may further open itself towards seeing the social and cultural value of their work to exist outside of the marketplace and commissioned engagement. All too often, "Design outside this arena is viewed with suspicion as escapist or unreal,"[81] or a dimension

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[77] Rancière, 141.

[78] Quoted in Poynor, 97.

[79] Quoted in Max Bruinsma, "An Ideal Design Is Not Yet," *Max Bruinsma*, 1999, http://maxbruinsma.nl/index1.html?ideal-e.html.

[80] Dunne and Raby, 36.

[81] Ibid., 29.

reserved for activist artwork. The desire to invest in the design practice for its own sake is a perspective well championed by designer and writer Daniel van der Velden. In "Research and Destroy," the author advocates for an investment in design itself, for, "A discipline that conducts research and generates knowledge—knowledge that makes it possible to seriously participate in discussions that are not about design."[82] Van der Velden rails against designers who base their design engagement on external motivation, validation, or the end goal of financial success. Instead, he promotes a practice in which designers, through research and knowledge, are fully equipped to engage with the world, and where the search for knowledge is more important than the apparent success or failure of its outcome. A crucial aspect of Van der Velden's critique is in his rejection of design as a discipline of problem solving,[83] a common notion that has dominated professional design practice. To believe that design holds the answers to the most complex and deeply rooted issues of politics, culture, and socio-economics is a naive and arrogant notion at best.[84] However, the optimism of problem-solving is worth retaining. The desire to improve upon things and make constructive change is the underlying desire of any activist engagement. As described by Max Bruinsma in "An Ideal Design Is Not Yet," "Our fixation on the ultimate goal can obscure the path towards it and cloud our view of the reality of the present…The realization that the ideal has not yet been achieved forces the Utopian to acknowledge the need to work for change in the present."[85] When designers reject the notion of a fixed end result, and perhaps most crucially, embrace the viewer as a part of the artwork rather than end point of it,"The designer not only leaves room for the recipient's and reader's own interpretation of the message—an emancipatory aspect, this—he also creates the space for a personal standpoint. The design now suggests that this is how things might be—it opens a dialogue about the way it itself functions in the communication process of which it is a part."[86] This point is further detailed by Dan Hill, who appropriates director Alfred

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[82] Daniel van der Velden, "Research and Destroy: Graphic Design as Investigation" in *Graphic Design: Now in Production* (New York: Walker Art Center, 2011), 18.

[83] Ibid.

[84] K. Michael Hays, introduction to *Hejduk's Chronotope* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 12.

[85] Max Bruinsma, "An Ideal Design Is Not Yet," *Max Bruinsma*, 1999, http://maxbruinsma.nl/index1.html?ideal-e.html.

[86] Ibid.

Hitchcock's concept of "the MacGuffin, an inconsequential device used to power a story along"[87] into design practice. Hill uses this term to emphasize the importance of unintended benefits resulting from design work. The questions a design poses may become more important, effective, and meaningful than not only the designed artifact(s), but the concept it tried to convey entirely, "Think of the role of the Holy Grail in Indiana Jones. The grail itself is neither here nor there, but it provides a useful motivation for the japes and scrapes that Indy gets into along the way."[88] This is not to say that design in this sense is rendered obsolete or disposable, but rather, raises the importance of allowing a design process to retain a natural course of direction, as the focus on end-product solutions or forms limits the designer's ability to explore these vagaries of questions and research potential emanating from any design project. In socio-political contexts, this is especially important, recognizing the value of the issue and ideology at hand as more important than the particular artifact or form it takes. Further, the socio-political discussion opened up by an artifact may also reveal other socio-political dimensions that were previously unknown or underestimated. Ultimately, the benefits of having a process oriented approach allows designers to "think beyond the nail-shaped problems we'll figure out how to bang with our particular hammer; we stop looking at the world as one big design problem to be solved, and instead see it as a bunch of avenues waiting to be explored and challenged."[89] When one rejects the notion that design can completely address socio-political conflict, and abandons the notion that design can promise revolution or upheaval, design is more adequately equipped to engage with specific socio-political issues in specific contexts, creating artifacts, interactions, and processes through which focused concerns can be expressed.[90] Here, design retains a realistic pursuit, and thus, an actionable one. A critical design practice that embraces contestational strategies and theories is also a design that is closer to itself, one that is grounded in human dignity and the expression of the self before it finds validation in expression of commercial interest. Design scholar Richard Buchanan discusses how design operates as an "instrument

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87 Quoted in Rob Peart, "Why Design is Not Problem Solving + Design Thinking Isn't Always the Answer," *AIGA Eye on Design*, January 19 2017, https://eyeondesign.aiga.org/why-design-is-not-problem-solving-design-thinking-isnt-always-the-answer/.

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid.

90 DiSalvo, 125.

of cultural life,"[91] and "one of the practical disciplines of responsible action for bringing the high values of a country or a culture into concrete reality, allowing us to transform abstract ideas into specific manageable form."[92] As the agent and producer of a vast number of social, cultural, and political aspects of society, a contestational design perspective simply recognizes design as the "interactions and transactions that constitute the social and economic fabric of a country."[93] One that does not have to wait for philosophical or political progress to occur in order to respond to it, one that is not removed from the arena of politics and enacting social change, nor has to ask for anyone's permission to engage with social change, but rather, is constantly in its throes.

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[91] Richard Buchanan, "Human Dignity and Human Rights: Thoughts on the Principles of Human-Centered Design," *Design Issues* 17, no. 3 (2011): 38.

[92] Ibid.

[93] Ibid.

Reflections

In my own practice and course of research in this topic, I have focused my attention to analysis of how people use design to engage socio-political issues, particularly in the act of protest. In order situate these theoretical approaches in a specific context, I have focused on the political climate in Poland as a site of exploration. Poland is a country that has a rich history of visual communication, particularly in how it has been used throughout its history to engage in political ways. From the overthrowing of communist rule with the Solidarność labour movement, Poland has been a contentious site of democratic politics. The late 2015 election of the ruling Law and Justice Party marked the beginning of Poland's constitutional crisis. Poland's government is led by a Prime Minister (head of government), Beata Szydło, and President (head of state), Andrzej Duda. Executive power is exercised by the President and the Government, consisting of a council of ministers led by the Prime Minister. However, currently the most powerful political figure in Poland is Jarosław Kaczynski, the current leader of the populist right wing Law and Justice Party. Since the election in 2015, Poland has taken considerable steps to the right in its policies—refusing to accept any refugees from the Middle East, proposing restrictive laws regarding women's rights to abortion and in vitro fertilization, the firing and replacing of all journalists working for state run media, limiting journalistic and media access to parliament, and making considerable changes to Poland's constitutional court system that have garnered concern about the state of democracy and rule of law by the international community—particularly the European Union (EU).

There has been growing opposition to these policies at home and abroad. For example, women's marches were organized in protest of proposed plans to further tighten already restrictive abortion laws, and the outpouring of public dissent led to the law being withdrawn. Despite this, concerns continue, and Kaczynski's eurosceptic and paranoid platform is widely considered to have markers of autocracy.

As a first generation Canadian to Polish immigrant parents, the political situation in the country is of particular significance to myself and to my family. When I conduct research into contemporary and historical politics, visual communication, and social engagement in Poland, in a sense I am conducting research on myself and my discipline. Understanding how design can, even in the smallest of ways, affect

awareness, knowledge, or engagement with current political issues provides me with a sense of using my career for a purpose closely aligned to my heritage and my passions.

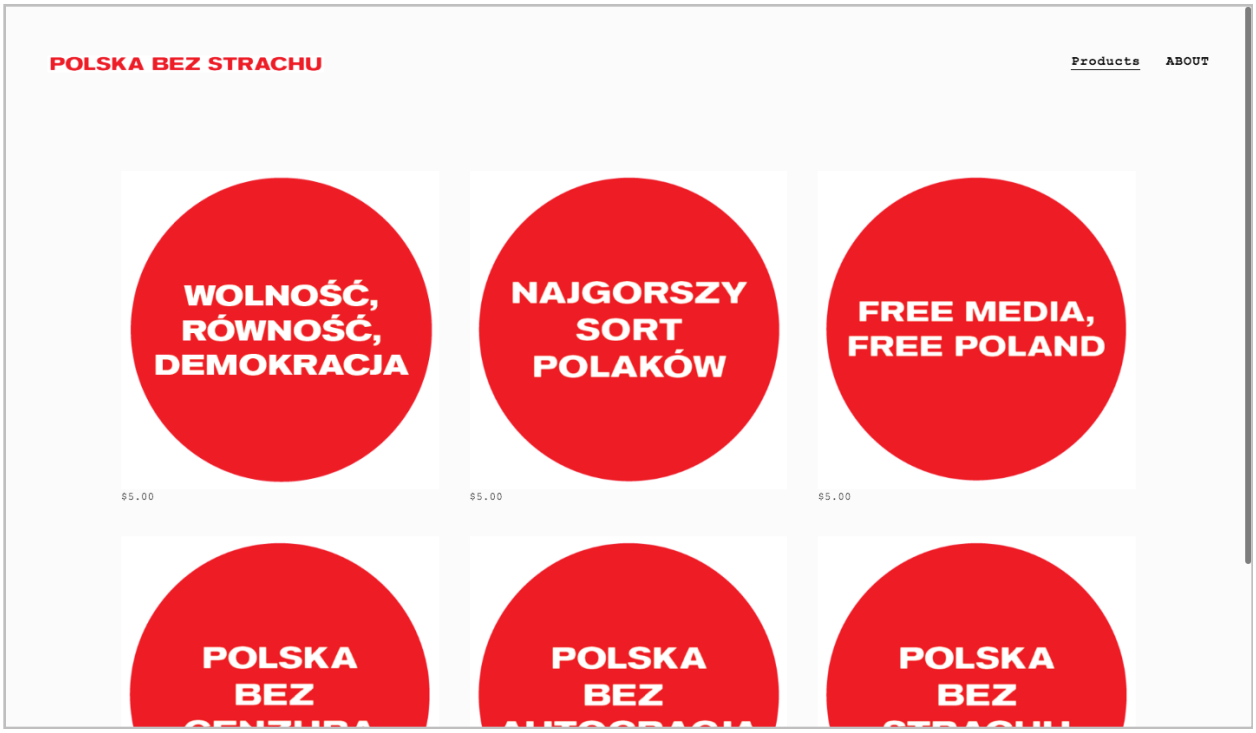
One visual exploration led me to create an activist platform of dissent against the current government through creating very simple and very direct artifacts like buttons and stickers featuring bold red and white, colours of national identity, and phrases such as "Poland without fear," "Poland without censorship," "Poland without autocracy," "free media, free Poland," "freedom, equality, democracy," and "Poles of the worst sort"—a reference to Kaczynski's comments about his political opponents—strong statements about political perspective on Polish politics and language used by demonstrators themselves (Image 1–4). With a succinct statement on the current political situation and simple navigation, this website attempts to distill the complex state of Polish politics into a direct point of DIY advocacy. The website is set up to donate all proceeds directly to a Polish group called the committee for the defence of democracy, an activist group that has become a leader of the opposition movement. Stickers and pins are common items of political engagement, allowing people to wear and literally embody a symbol of their political support or opposition, as well as co-opt their surroundings with stickers to create statements in any context they wish. While this work does function in a contestational way, I found it to ultimately be a bit too prescriptive, as those who disagree or don't have any familiarity with the issue may not find it approachable or intriguing in a satisfying way. I felt as though I needed to re-evaluate my approach, to find a means of expression that bridged providing contextual information with a direct point of access that could foster more thorough discussion, leading me to my final artifacts (Appendix).

I have also experimented with some print-based interventions, by printing statements and quotes regarding the political situation on Polish language newspapers to create posters that create a commentary on current issues regarding freedom of the media (Image 5–6). The language used in these posters is taken from articles about current politics as well as from civilian protest signs. This visual research has helped me break down common graphic languages in protest design. Here, messages are often explicitly political and direct, typically using short slogans or phrases, limited colour palettes, use of simple icons, logos, and visual metaphors. These expressions generally fall into two forms—grassroots

and more digitalized, professionally produced works. Grassroots expressions utilize hand-drawn typography and images, and a greater variety of viewpoints expressed in accompanying text. Polished expressions of activism typically take a more directly branded approach, utilizing more consistency in the visual expression of a particular idea. A primary example of this division can be found in the visual expressions created by supporters of the ruling party and those of its opposition. Study of these visual approaches can reveal attitudes about the implicit and explicit ideologies of those who produced them. In this example, supporters of the Polish government tend to utilize the graphic language of the party's actual branding, using campaign placards as signs of expression, in addition to nationalistic icons like the flag, the Polish eagle and crest, as well as visual language of various polish soccer teams, as many polish gangs are concentrated around football and have strong ideological opinions, coopting the language of the team as another nationalistic symbol. On the other hand, opposition groups tend to utilize a more grassroots approach, creating posters, banners, and shirts/other objects almost exclusively by themselves, also reflecting a wider array of phrases and slogans to express their political stances. Deconstructing these graphic choices further reveals attitudes about implicit and explicit ideologies, as, for example, highly recognizable cultural icons and a singular or very focused use of language signifies a nationalistic political view with a homogenous voice and proposed notion of what national identity should look like—as opposed to a grassroots collection of individually created expressions that collectively exist under the banner of opposition, reflecting a political ideology that embraces heterogeneity of thought and individual subjectivity.

A primary point of struggle in my making process has been in the regards to authenticity and aestheticization of politics through graphic design. Use of protest language and visual cues outside of the context of the street has often led to design work that feels insincere, as these choices are no longer motivated by practical reasons (i.e., carrying a visible message on a literal stick and poster), becoming purely stylistic decisions (Image 7–9). Another difficulty in this search for expression has been in adequately expressing concern about current political issues in Poland whilst also providing enough contextual information for them to be understood by an audience not already familiar with its nature (Image 10), such as using the Polish eagle as a symbol of national identity. I have found myself relying

more heavily on my own supporting descriptions of context for these examples than the actual visual output, leaving the images to quickly become inadequate and secondary to that which I am expressing through language. Ultimately, this has made me consider the difficulty in reconciling the difference between visualizing politics, and politicizing the visual. While naturally closely intertwined, it has led me to a consider a new approach when making politically engaged work. I find more success in my experimentation when I consider myself a citizen first, and a designer second. Focusing on what the message is and what it desires before considering the designerly implications of it allows work to breathe from a place of authenticity. Effective visual communication about socio-political content cannot come from a contrived or overly prescriptive place, it must be an expression of one's own investment, passions, and interests first. For if it does not retain this quality in itself, it cannot ask its audience to do so.



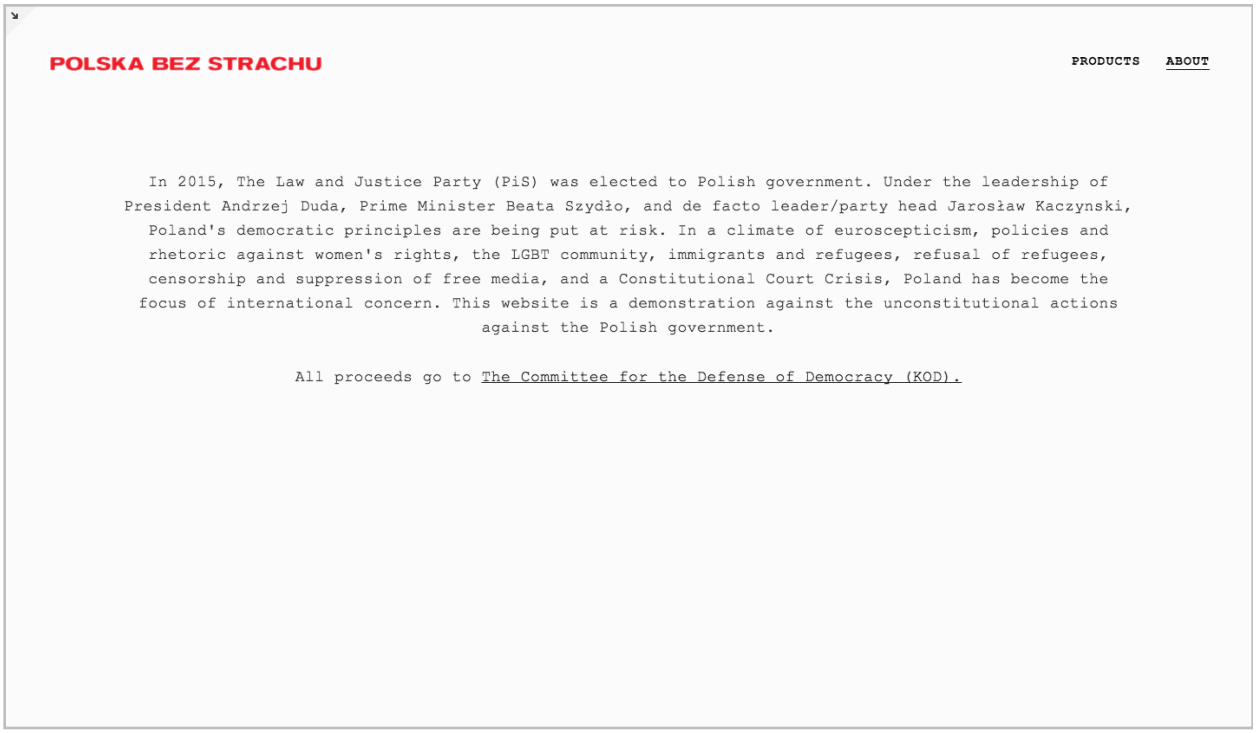


Image 1 (top), Image 2 (bottom). Justine Rudnicki, *Poland Without Fear*, 2017. Website.

Image 3 (top), Image 4 (bottom). Justine Rudnicki, *Poland Without Fear*, 2017. Website.

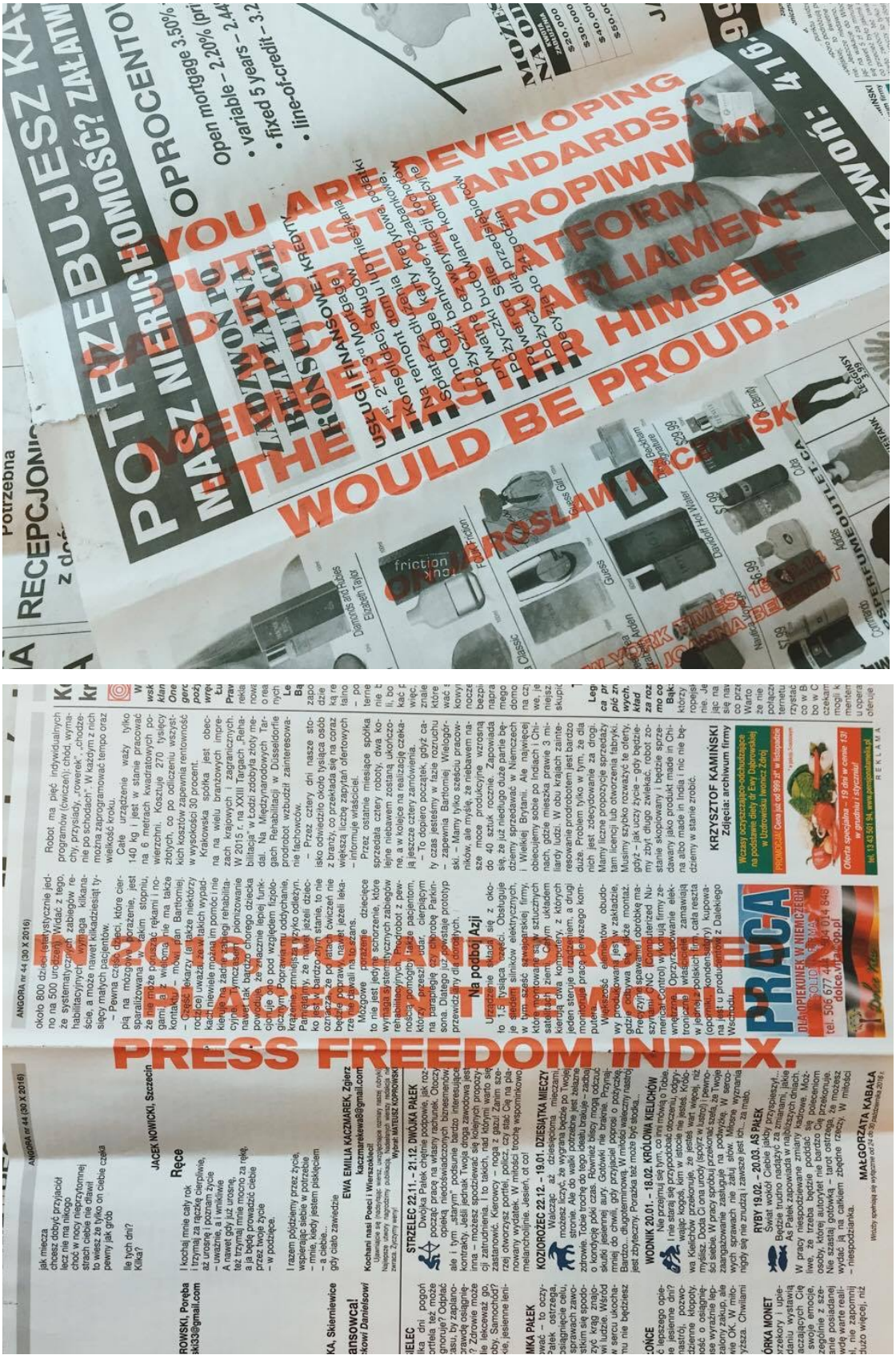


Image 5 (top), Image 6 (bottom). Justine Rudnicki, *Experiments*, 2016. Poster, 9" x 17".

Image 7. Justine Rudnicki, *Fuck Seriously?*, 2016. Poster, 12" x 18".

Image 8. Justine Rudnicki, *The Worst Sort of Poles*, 2016. Poster, 12" x 18".

Image 9. Justine Rudnicki, *No Woman, No Country*, 2016. Poster, 12" x 18".

Image 10. Justine Rudnicki, *Eagle Without Wings*, 2016. Poster, 16" x 24".

Conclusion

In the course of my research, I have sought to define a more thorough understanding of how design engages with politics in a meaningful manner. Through studying the ways that people naturally express themselves in socio-political contexts as well as existing theories and strategies of using design to articulate socio-political ideologies, I have built a body of knowledge regarding the politics of representation, of vision, of culture, and ultimately, of design.

This study has provided me with a basis upon which to position graphic design as a political practice. The schema proposed in this research aims to highlight these methods and practices that create and govern design practice. Acknowledging vision as a form of knowledge has enabled me to pursue theoretical and practical strategies of contestational design fully informed of its psychological, political, and aesthetic dimensions. Processes of semiotics and psychoanalysis, as well as strategies such as satire, metaphor, alienation, and recontextualization, as well as a more thorough understanding of the political and cultural space in which design operates equip designers with a new sensitivity to their practice. Contestational design presents an acute awareness of the social implications of graphic design work, recognizing the designer's role in shaping another person's subjectivity, reaffirming their deeply held beliefs, and contributing to broader systems of language and representation used the world over. Through creating moments that demand inquiry into representation and the political, design can speak with a contestational voice to interrogate the very things it has had a role in creating. The visual articulation of complex problems fosters discussion, debate, and simply makes it visible—witnessing a problem forces a viewer to confront it and make a judgement or consideration of it. To create form is to visually clarify something that may be as complex as socio-political struggles of identity, class, race, gender, censorship, basic freedoms, and so on. In a contemporary context of political conflict, instability, and the rise of right wing populism around the world, this is especially crucial. The process of inquiry and giving form allows for design work to remain open—not proclaiming a final ideology or use, but allowing itself to exist in a state of inherent incompleteness that is closed when it becomes social. Adversarial design essentially uses contestation to create contestation, always seeking to exist as a state of encounter.

Ultimately, the purpose of this study is to put forth the positive potentials of using contestational design strategies and approaches in order to enact social change. While design is a pluralistic practice and I do not intend to position this perspective on design work as the only morally righteous path for design to take, growing authorship, design work, and academic engagement with the topic and related issues demonstrates the hunger that exists in the design community to develop discussion and work about the role of politics in contemporary political design. Through such forms of inquiry, it is my belief that designers will be better empowered to not only engage with their own opinions, but their communities, their peers, and their very discipline. The alternative, to not consider the political dimension of design or its ability to be a catalyst for social change, would be a disservice to the very practice, as meaning would continue to be forged and moulded into culture regardless. Consciousness around these decisions, through valuing contestation and debate over consensus for the sake of consensus, to bring forth knowledge and representation to make it known and understood—these are the potentials that lie in contestational and agonistic approaches to visual communication. Engaging in contestation in political, visual, and social dimensions demonstrates a commitment to the efficacy of design as an agent of social change. As a discipline that demands cultural sensitivity and (formal or informal) training in expression, this thesis states that designers have a responsibility to consider the fullest potentials and repercussions of their skills. Without this consideration of implied and explicit socio-political ideology in the visual, designers may be proponents of an ideology they do not wish to reinforce. In the words of Slavoj Žižek, "Sometimes doing nothing is the most violent thing to do."[94]

[94] Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (New York: Picador, 2008), 217.

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Appendix *(additional images may be viewed at http://justinerudnicki.com)*

1. *Two Plus Two Makes Five*, a book about the political situation in Poland from 2015 to present day.

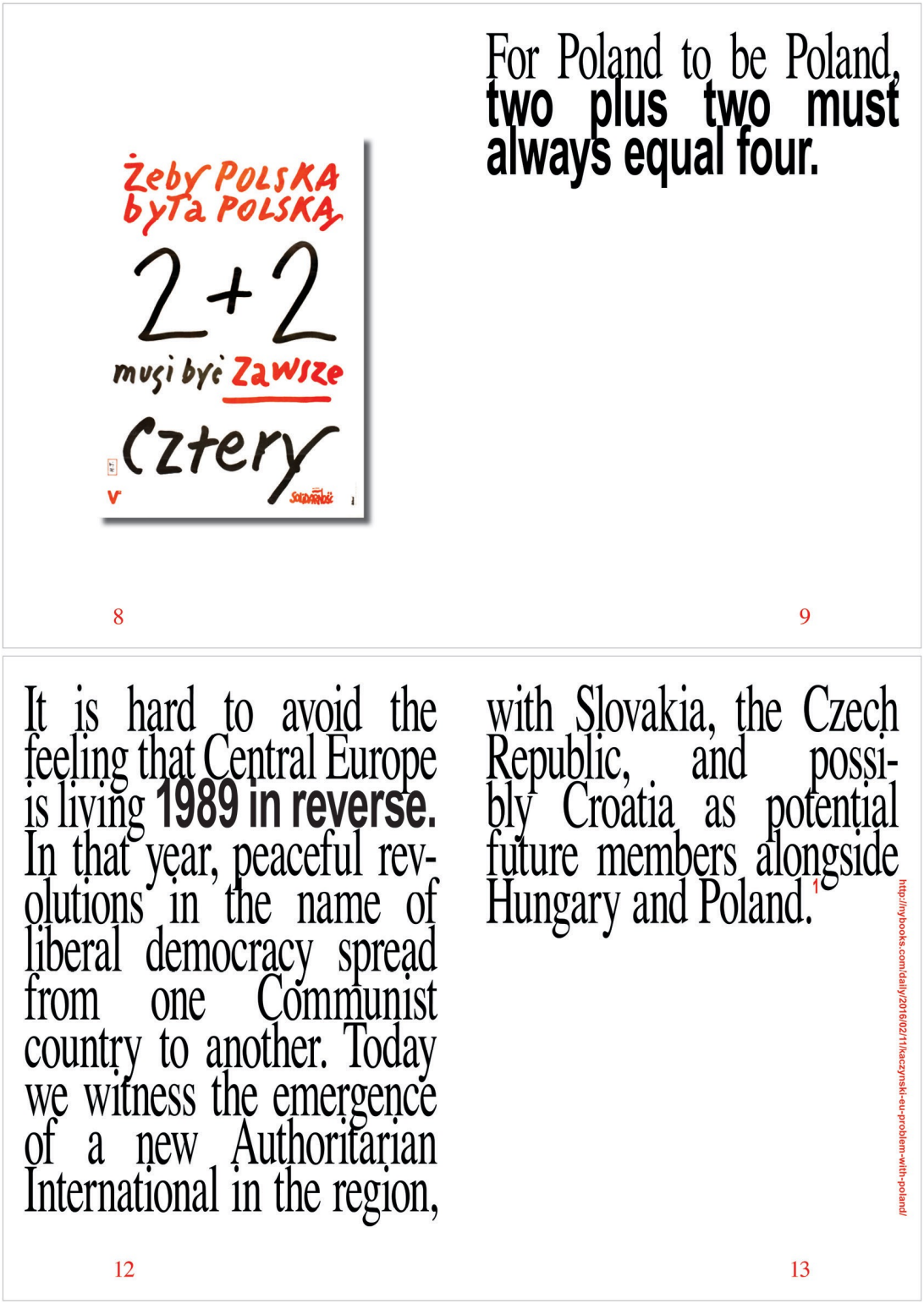

Image 11 (top), Image 12 (bottom). Justine Rudnicki, *Two Plus Two Makes Five,* 2017. 168 pages, 7.25" x 10", laser print.

The capital of Poland is **Warsaw**, and the currency is the złoty. Some well known Polish citizens include Marie Curie, Nikolaus Copernicus, Pope John Paul II, Frédéric Chopin, Janusz Kamiński, Robert Lewandowski, and Anja Rubik.

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Image 13 (top), Image 14 (bottom). Justine Rudnicki, *Two Plus Two Makes Five,* 2017. 168 pages, 7.25" x 10", laser print.

Image 15 (top), Image 16 (bottom). Justine Rudnicki, *Two Plus Two Makes Five,* 2017. 168 pages, 7.25" x 10", laser print.

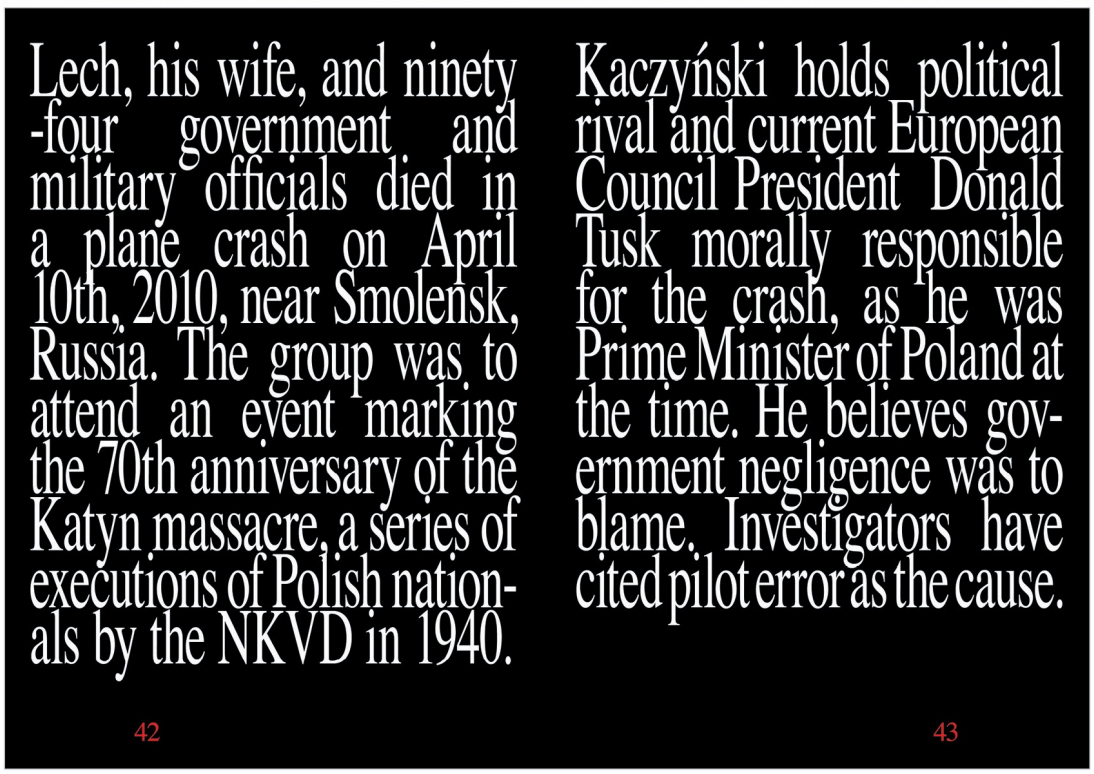


Image 17 (top), Image 18 (bottom). Justine Rudnicki, *Two Plus Two Makes Five,* 2017. 168 pages, 7.25" x 10", laser print.

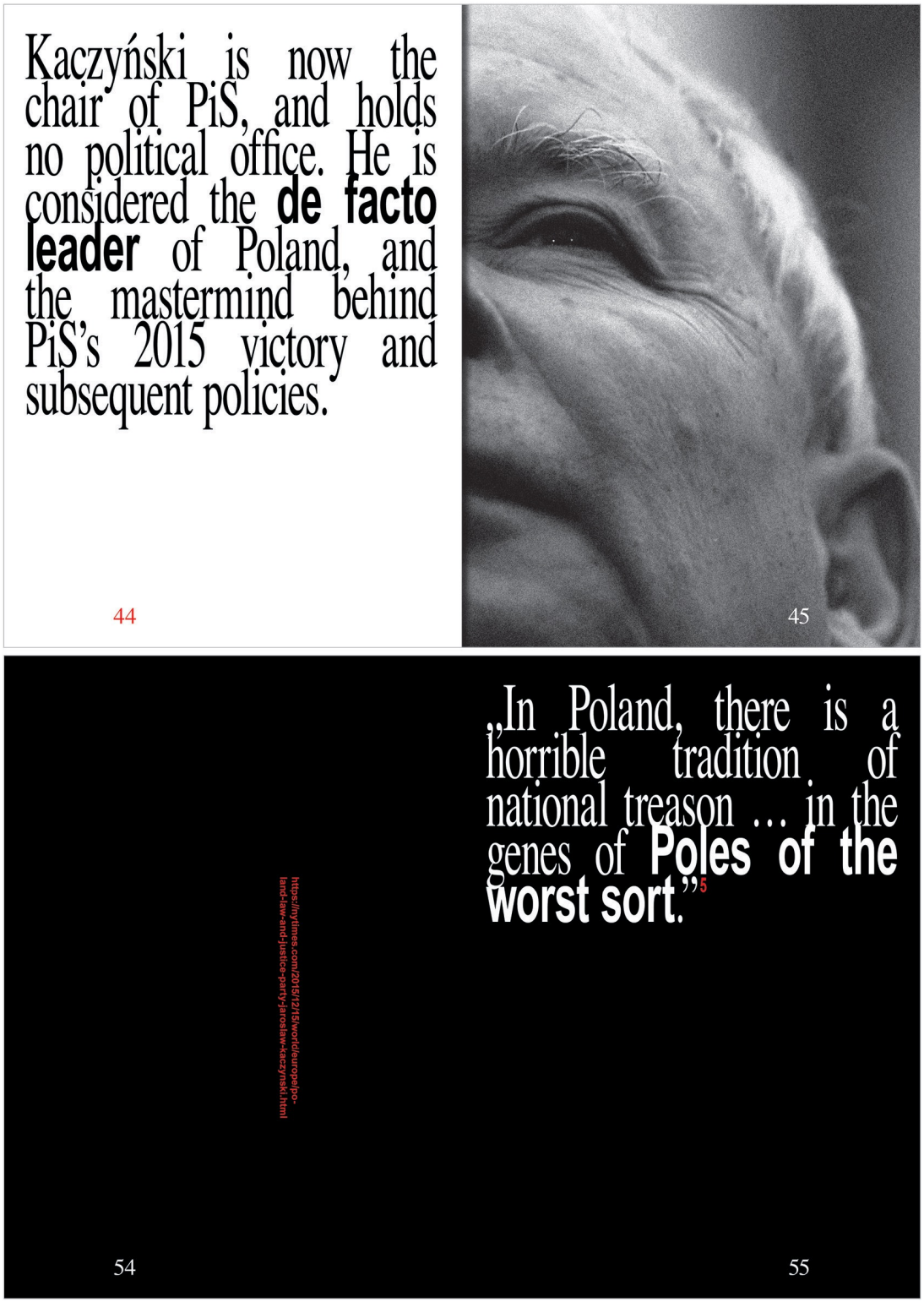


Image 19 (top), Image 20 (bottom). Justine Rudnicki, *Two Plus Two Makes Five,* 2017. 168 pages, 7.25" x 10", laser print.

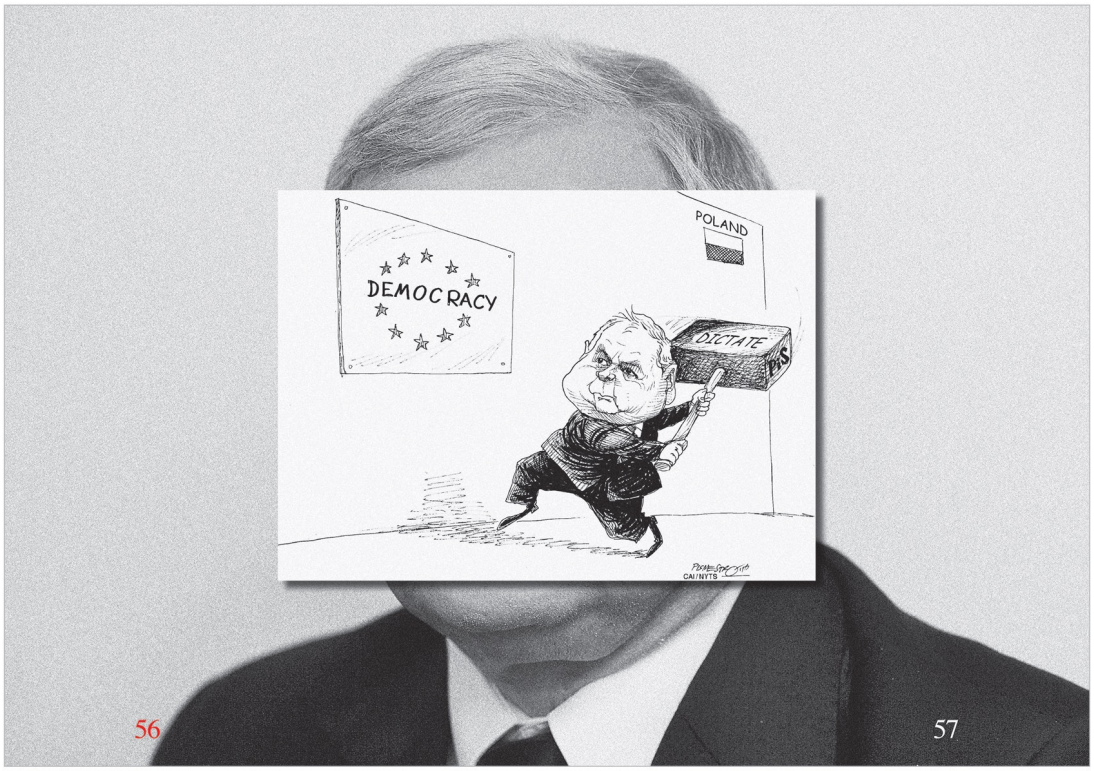
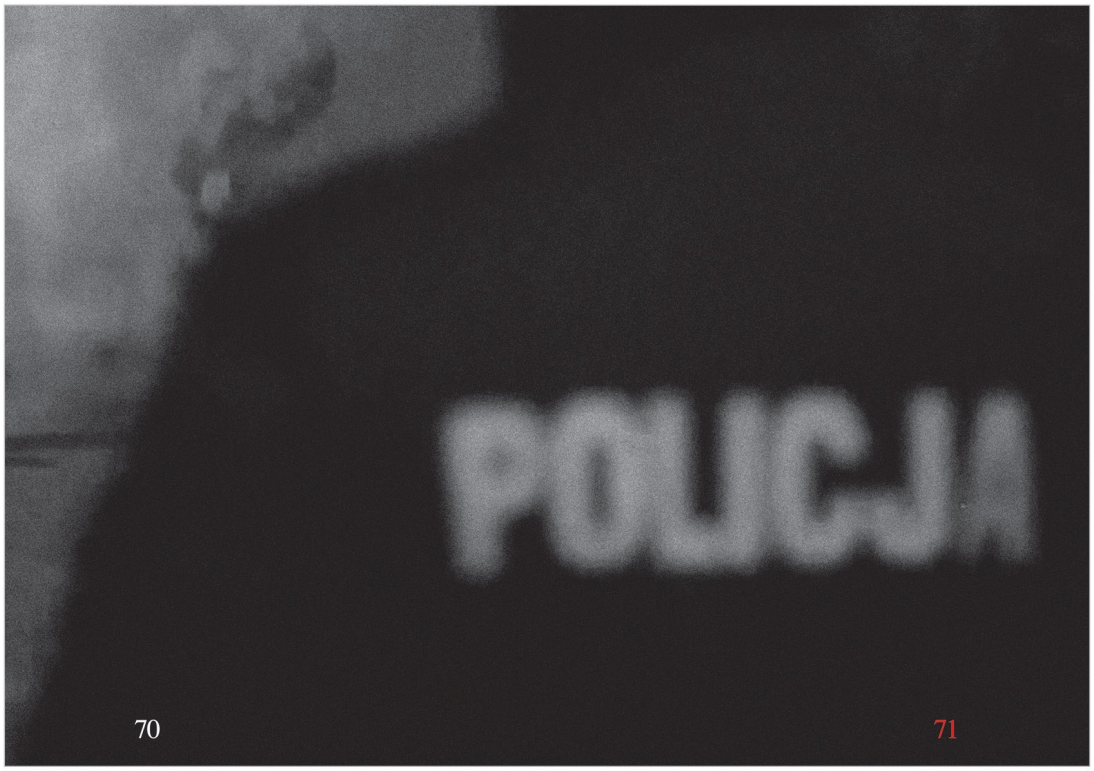


Image 21 (top), Image 22 (bottom). Justine Rudnicki, *Two Plus Two Makes Five,* 2017. 168 pages, 7.25" x 10", laser print.



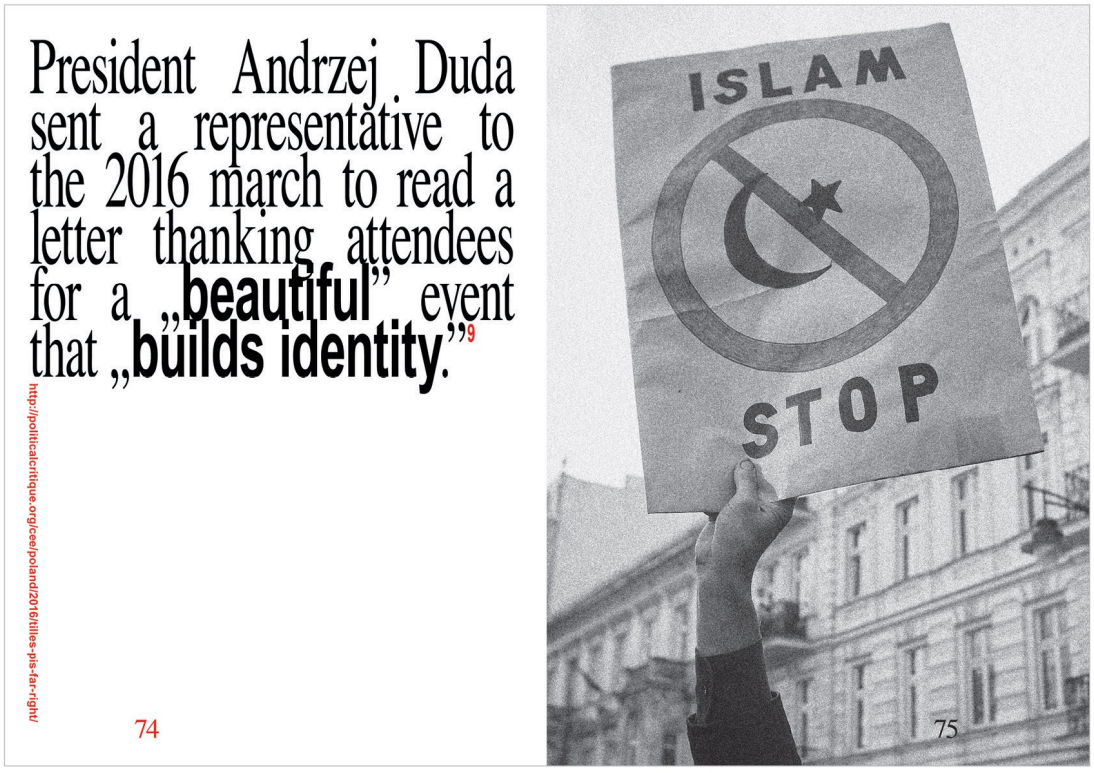


Image 23 (top), Image 24 (bottom). Justine Rudnicki, *Two Plus Two Makes Five,* 2017. 168 pages, 7.25" x 10", laser print.

Image 25 (top), Image 26 (bottom). Justine Rudnicki, *Two Plus Two Makes Five,* 2017. 168 pages, 7.25" x 10", laser print.

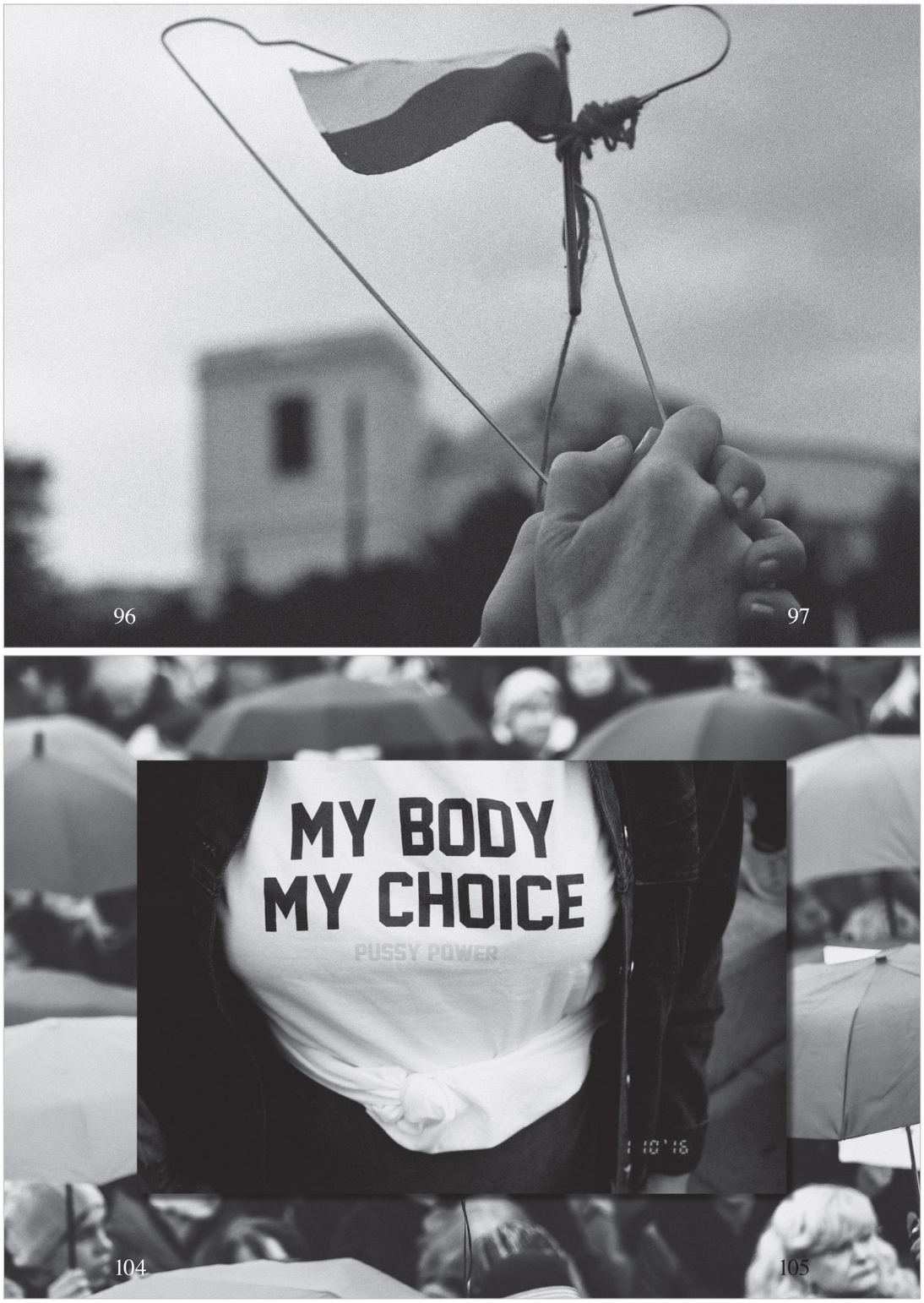


Image 27 (top), Image 28 (bottom). Justine Rudnicki, *Two Plus Two Makes Five,* 2017. 168 pages, 7.25" x 10", laser print.

Image 29 (top), Image 30 (bottom). Justine Rudnicki, *Two Plus Two Makes Five,* 2017. 168 pages, 7.25" x 10", laser print.

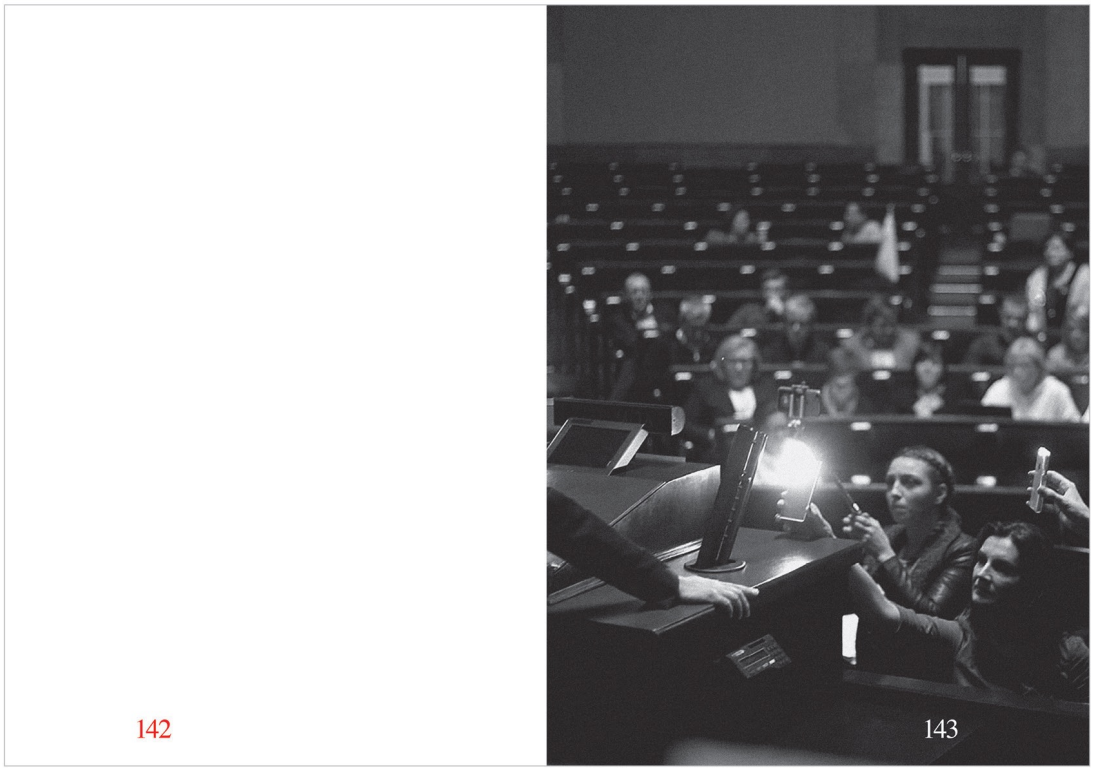


Image 31 (top), Image 32 (bottom). Justine Rudnicki, *Two Plus Two Makes Five,* 2017. 168 pages, 7.25" x 10", laser print.

Image 33 (top), Image 34 (bottom). Justine Rudnicki, *Two Plus Two Makes Five,* 2017. 168 pages, 7.25" x 10", laser print.

2. *Two Plus Two Makes Five*, accompanying poster series.

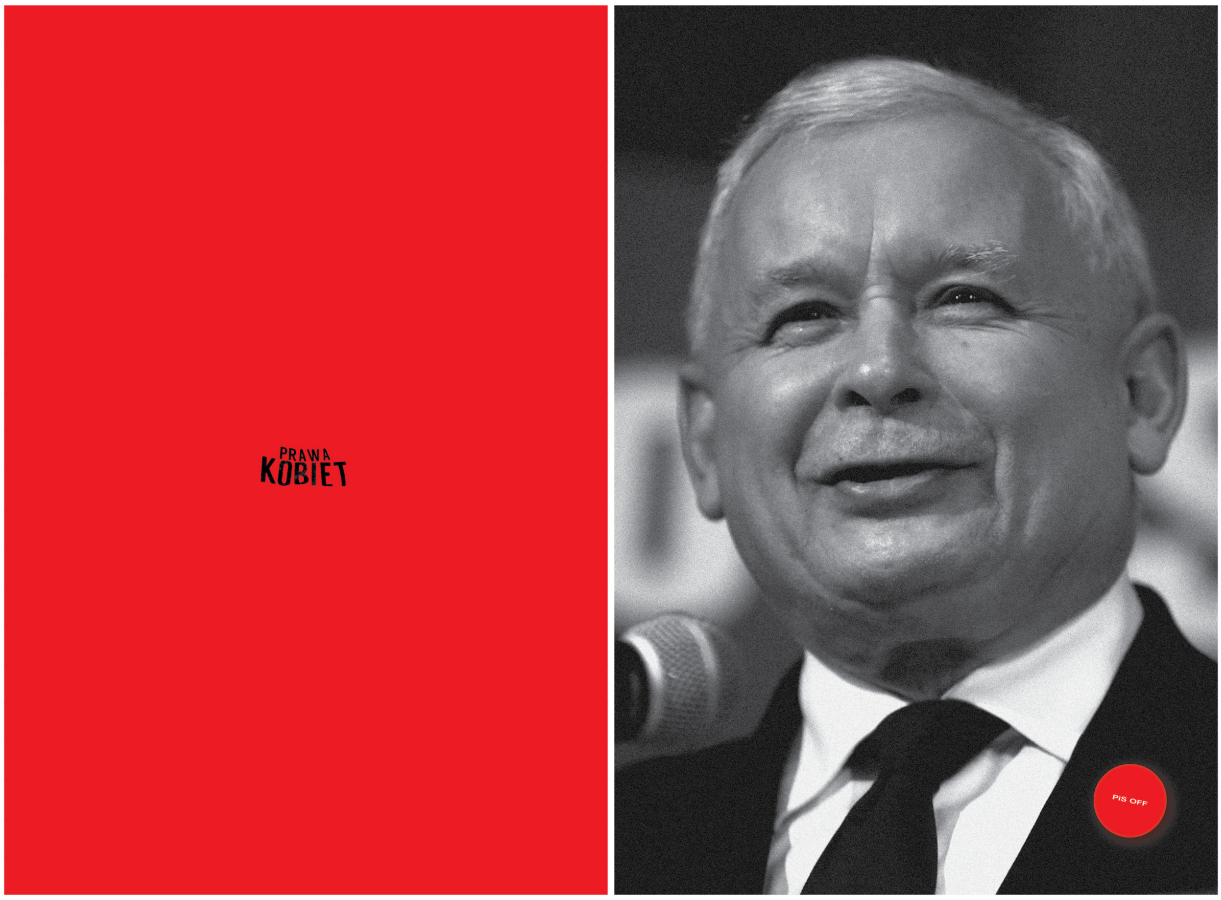


Image 35 (left), Image 36 (right). Justine Rudnicki, *Two Plus Two Makes Five*, 2017. Posters, 16" x 24", inkjet print.

Image 37 (left), Image 38 (right). Justine Rudnicki, *Two Plus Two Makes Five*, 2017. Posters, 16" x 24", inkjet print.

Image 39 (left), Image 40 (right). Justine Rudnicki, *Two Plus Two Makes Five,* 2017. Posters, 16" x 24", inkjet print.

3. *Two Plus Two Makes Five*, accompanying pins and stickers.

Image 37. Justine Rudnicki, *Two Plus Two Makes Five*, 2017. Produced as 1" and 1.5" metal pins and 1" and 3" vinyl stickers.

4. *Two Plus Two Makes Five*, accompanying website providing a social platform for sharing design interventions, selling aforementioned pins/stickers in support of Polish NGOs, and sharing information.

Image 38. Justine Rudnicki, *Two Plus Two Makes Five*, 2017. Website, http://twoplustwomakesfive.squarespace.com.

Image 39 (top), Image 40 (bottom). Justine Rudnicki, *Two Plus Two Makes Five,* 2017. Website, http://twoplustwomakesfive.squarespace.com.