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Objects of Politics, Objects of Art: Three Studies on the Display of American Political Prints

Ricardo Chavez
San Jose State University

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OBJECTS OF POLITICS, OBJECTS OF ART:
THREE STUDIES ON THE DISPLAY OF AMERICAN POLITICAL PRINTS

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Art and Art History

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Ricardo Chavez

August 2018

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

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THRE STUDIES ON THE DISPLAY OF AMERICAN POLITICAL PRINTS

by

Ricardo Chavez

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ART AND ART HISTORY

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

August 2018

Anthony Raynsford, Ph.D.

Department of Art and Art History

Beverly Grindstaff, Ph.D.

Department of Art and Art History

Dore Bowen, Ph.D.

Department of Art and Art History

ABSTRACT

OBJECTS OF POLITICS, OBJECTS OF ART: THREE STUDIES ON THE DISPLAY OF AMERICAN POLITICAL PRINTS

by Ricardo Chavez

Fueled by the radical political thinking of the 1960s and beyond, people in the United States produced artistic responses in the form of political prints and posters for both documenting and actively galvanizing the popular movements of this era. This study analyzes the display of these prints and posters within an art-viewing context. It argues that, with characteristics of both objects of politics and objects of art, these works possess dynamic meaning that can be impacted by the institutional narratives of the locations in which they reside. Looking at three examples of political print exhibitions organized individually by the Museum of Modern Art, the Oakland Museum of California, and the Center for the Study of Political Graphics, this study compares how different institutions affect the viewer's comprehension of the meaning of these works. With consideration for the democratic intentions of this kind of art, this study ultimately stresses the importance of communicating both the political and artistic qualities of political prints in order for viewers in the present to truly understand the legacy of the real people and movements that they represent.

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Finally, I dedicate this thesis to my family as well. Though they might not fully understand my work, they understand and support my pursuit of it, which is all I ever needed.

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Introduction

Artistic production plays a major role in social activism. In particular, art objects created via the process of printmaking, including fine art prints, posters, flyers, billboards, etc., possess the qualities and a documented reputation for their involvement in moments of social and political unrest. While many of these printed works get discarded after their use as implements of political communication, a number of them alternatively receive recognition for their artistic value. These works end up in collections and, potentially, on display in galleries and even major museums. But while political prints undoubtedly deserve recognition as legitimate works of art, and while exhibitions in galleries and museums effectively convey such legitimacy to the minds of public audiences, one must consider whether or not the act of displaying them within such formal, institutional settings allows audiences to truly comprehend the multifaceted nature of these prints.

This study thus addresses the display of political prints in the context of the museum and gallery space. Specifically, it looks at prints created as part of the radical movements that occurred predominantly during the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. The people involved in movements of this period like the New Left produced posters dedicated to disseminating political messages out to the public. For the most part, these messages represented the marginalized individuals who faced discrimination, injustice, and oppression in their lives. They turned to the far-reaching medium of printmaking when they needed their voices heard. Now in the present, one finds their voices documented through these political prints and showcased to the world in print exhibitions. Voices like

that of Emory Douglas in *Untitled (On the Bones of the Oppressors)* (1969) belonged to real people who felt the sting of wrongdoings and challenged the more powerful for the sake of those around them (fig. 1). Recognition of the prints means recognition of these people and the struggles they endured as well.

Fig. 1: Emory Douglas. *Untitled (On the Bones of the Oppressors)*. 1969. Offset. From the All of Us or None archive of the Oakland Museum of California, <http://collections.museumca.org/?q=category/2011-schema/history/political-posters>.

A growing appreciation of these works is now generating a number of exhibitions since the late 1980s that intend to highlight the legacy of late twentieth century political activism, as conveyed through objects of cultural and aesthetic value. A discussion about how one understands them as objects of art on display in our current era is now necessary. What happens to the legacy of social and political activism when contextualized in art historical settings like museums and galleries? This study ultimately finds that a failure to properly communicate the multifaceted properties of political prints results in a misunderstanding of them and the legacy they represent in the eyes of

exhibition audiences. It therefore aims to find and address the conflicts that arise out of these exhibitions and, potentially, identify what kinds of methods of display most appropriately take into consideration the nature of political prints as both objects of politics and objects of art.

To accomplish this, this study examines political print exhibitions held at three distinct institutions that allow for three different situations of display to analyze and then compare. First, The Museum of Modern Art in New York City, dedicated to the display of Modern art, presents an example of political prints displayed in the context of a major art museum. Second, the Oakland Museum of California presents an interdisciplinary museum in which art is not necessarily the main focus. The final institution, the Center for the Study of Political Graphics in Culver City, California, represents a nonprofit archival organization with a specific devotion to the collection and display of political prints as such.

Each analysis begins with a brief summary of the exhibition in order to determine the goals and intentions of the institution in displaying political prints. The analysis then proceeds to break down the exhibition parameters by looking at the kinds of prints displayed, their provenance, the people who made them, and the organizational strategy utilized by the curator(s). Linking all these aspects together is the narrative of the institution in question. “Institutional narrative,” in the most basic sense, refers to everything that makes up the identity of the institution. This includes its mission, history, curators, physical design, preexisting collection, and anything else important for establishing and maintaining the self-perception and image it aims to present to the

public. The objective is to comprehend how these aspects of the institution affect (if at all) the political prints on display. The final section of each analysis summarizes the findings and considers any further developments that occurred after the exhibition.¹

In Part I, the analysis of MOMA's 1988 exhibition, *Committed to Print: Social and Political Themes in Recent American Printed Art*, asks what happens to the meaning of political prints when placed in the context of a powerful museum with major influence over other institutions in the art world. By exhibiting these kinds of works, the museum attempts to consolidate the history of political printmaking in the 1960s and beyond with the history of Modern art that MOMA has largely been responsible for cultivating. While this context supports an argument that the prints deserve consideration into the story of art in the twentieth century, how does such a narrative convey the politics in the prints, especially when MOMA's own politics possess a fluctuating history as a result of institutional influence?

In Part II, OMCA is examined as it displays a near-identical exhibition, in terms of the premise, to that of MOMA. For the 2012 exhibition, *All of Us or None: Social Justice Posters of the San Francisco Bay Area*, the context and narrative differ, however, in that OMCA displays political prints from an interdisciplinary perspective as opposed to a more art-centered perspective as seen in the first example. OMCA's divided devotion to the arts, history, and natural sciences (this third discipline admittedly plays little to no role in this particular exhibition) contextualize the prints in relation to the culture of the

¹ Such developments could include later exhibitions that featured political prints, changes to the institution's narrative, or newer strategies adopted by the institution for displaying this kind of art.

² It is also important to note that these two labels, "objects of politics" and "objects of art" are not independent of one another. A painting can certainly be a political object while a campaign ad

state of California, in particular to the liberal politics of the San Francisco Bay Area that gained national exposure in the mid 1960s.

Part III then introduces the 1996 exhibition, *Decade of Protest: Political Posters from the United States, Viet Nam, & Cuba, 1965-1975*, held at CSPG, an institution that contrasts with the MOMA example in a number of ways. Small, not-for-profit, and without an actual exhibition space, CSPG and its narrative cater to the display and study of political prints, leading one to question if such an institution better accommodates this kind of art and its specific characteristics than do the previous examples. The overt political alignment of CSPG with (predominantly) liberal grassroots politics further differentiates it from larger institutions less keen to declare any political alliance one way or the other.

Because political prints possess characteristics of both objects of politics and objects of art, it becomes problematic to consider one of these aspects more than the other.² When viewing them more so as objects of politics, one reflects on the ideas they communicate more than their artistic elements. This perspective treats them as functional objects and, therefore, accentuates the roles they played as part of the radical movements of the second half of the twentieth century. The individuals who created them wished to spread their views on issues like war, race, and gender by posting them in public places like street walls and store windows or holding them up during marches and rallies in the

² It is also important to note that these two labels, “objects of politics” and “objects of art” are not independent of one another. A painting can certainly be a political object while a campaign ad can be artistic in its own right.

hopes of igniting a democratic call for change. These prints helped transform the political views of those who encountered them, and thus possess importance as political artifacts.

By contrast, viewing political prints primarily as objects of art entails more admiration of their aesthetics than the messages they relay. Graphic design involves shaping text and images to produce visual communication in society, and the creators of these prints utilized their artistic skills to create eye-catching graphics and ensure their ideals infiltrated the public consciousness. Taken as a whole, these graphics introduced a unique artistic vocabulary that included new iconographies, cultural appropriations, and an influence from Pop and other major art movements at the time that ultimately gained the attention of not just the political world, but the art world as well. While the form and content may seem inseparable when it comes to these objects, the institutional narrative proves to have an effect on how one perceives them.

If exhibited in an institution that emphasizes objects *as* art, such as in an art museum, one questions whether these prints face the dilution of their politics. The opposite also holds true in a setting where politics is stressed instead, such as a public ad space. The inability to properly present these objects in a manner that recognizes both sides threatens to perpetuate an inaccurate understanding of political prints to a viewing audience. From an art historical perspective, such exhibition practices are unacceptable and warrant an examination to avoid any consequential misrepresentations of the prints and the historically significant era they belong to.

This study thus follows the shift towards emphasizing the role of context in the study of art history. As early as the 1970s, historians like Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach

acknowledged the tendency for art historians, especially those not studying pre-modern or nonwestern art, to ignore the role that context plays in the viewer's understanding of art, specifically within the space of the museum.³ Just like cultural artifacts found in foreign lands and relocated to museums to be displayed and studied, the prints in question moved from their original contexts, which were primarily public forums like walls and store windows for disseminating political thoughts, to the institutional context of the museum, where a different kind of public education occurs. This change of setting undoubtedly causes some kind of change in perception for these objects.

Understanding the narrative of the institution, therefore, relates to the importance of looking at how the meanings of the prints are affected by their setting. Cultural theorist Mieke Bal's description of narrative as it relates to collecting forms the basis for how this study examines each of the three institutions and their exhibitions. Bal notes how collections take on a subjective narrative created by their collectors. The collector attains the power of interpretation over the items in the collection and thus influences the viewer's understanding of them.⁴ For example, a non-African explorer taking a religious idol from the Congo to serve as decoration for his or her home transforms said object into something far different once surrounded by the other objects present in its new location.

A museum and gallery exhibition works in the same manner. The institution that acts as venue for an exhibition possesses a narrative defined by the other objects already on

³ Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, "The Museum of Modern Art as Late Capitalist Ritual: An Iconographic Analysis," in *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, ed. Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publisher, 2004), 484.

⁴ Mieke Bal, "Telling Objects; A Narrative Perspective on Collecting," *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, ed. Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publisher, 2004), 85.

display, as well as the other exhibitions it previously hosted. The people in control of what goes on display in an institution thus construct its narrative through subjective choices. Bal also indicates the dynamic nature of collections, adding that a collected object's meaning changes as the collection as a whole changes.⁵ This reciprocal relationship between the display space and the things *on* display becomes even more volatile when the two sides greatly clash with one another. And considering that political prints already carry such dynamic connotations as objects of both art and politics, these kinds of exhibitions surely threaten to create a conflict of interest in the already delicate relationship. Therefore, the three studies consider what changes occur in both the institutional narratives and the meanings of the prints when the two collide in each exhibition.

The ideas and writings explored in this study trace back to the work of Michel Foucault and his views on power-knowledge and institutions. In considering the role of the institutions in relation to the prints on display, one sees how Foucault's views on the subjectivity of discourse inform Bal's notion of narrative. Can a museum or gallery be trusted to present these prints, their political messages, and the history of twentieth century activism that they represent while maintaining the preexisting discourses emanating from within their walls? Sociologist Tony Bennett likewise draws from Foucault in his analysis of the role of museums:

The institutions comprising 'the exhibitionary complex,' by contrast, were involved in the transfer of objects and bodies from the enclosed and private domains in which they had previously been displayed (but to a restricted public) into progressively more open and public arenas where, through the

⁵ Ibid., 97.

representations to which they were subjected, they formed vehicles for inscribing and broadcasting the messages of power (but a different type) throughout society.⁶

In the case of these prints, however, one sees far more public objects suddenly enter the realms of institutions that control the cultural knowledge of a society.

But what exactly constitutes a “political print” in this study? While the term “printmaking” encompasses many different techniques used to produce works of art labeled “prints,” the exact criterion for these terms varies greatly among artists, scholars, and, as this study will demonstrate, collectors and exhibitors. Curators Gill Saunders and Rosie Miles identify an evolving definition for the word “print” from the private “fine-art prints” published in limited editions to the more public and affordable processes developed in the twentieth century.⁷ By the 1960s and into the present, further exploration into the process of printmaking yields a rather wide definition that takes into account most reproducible imagery, including 2D, digital, and even 3D objects.⁸

With that said, almost the entirety of the works encountered in this study falls under the traditional 2D classification of prints. Techniques like screenprinting and lithography dominate among the examples to be seen here, but the question of classifying lies not with the process but with the end product. When speaking of “political prints,” the poster (more specifically the screenprinted poster) stands above all as the most popular format for people wanting to communicate political ideals during the second half the twentieth century. However, one finds that what defines a “poster” differs more between

⁶ Tony Bennett, “The Exhibitionary Complex,” *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, ed. Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publisher, 2004), 414.

⁷ Gill Saunders and Rosemary Miles, *Prints Now: Directions and Definitions* (London: V & A Publications, 2006), 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

individuals and institutions than does what defines a “screenprint” or a “lithograph,” terms that refer to the technique utilized to produce a work and thus make it easier to identify. Instead, terms like poster, flyer, and graphic that intend to identify the object and not the process of production carry a level of ambiguity and potential confusion.

As this study will demonstrate, different institutions select different terms for which to refer to the works of their collections. An art object identified as a “poster” by one institution might be considered something completely different under the designated means for classification of another. Perhaps an institution requires a poster to fit a certain measurement, or perhaps only works produced via the screenprinting process can be considered posters while lithographic works fall under “fine prints.” Ultimately, one finds that these subtle differences reveal a lot about an institution and their understanding of these objects. For the sake of this study, an attempt will be made to utilize the specific terms adopted by each institution to refer to the works in their own collections. Nevertheless, this study will henceforth use the term “political prints” when speaking about this kind of art in general, as the word “print” identifies the process of production without specificity to any one technique.

The “political” aspect of the term refers to only one of two kinds of prints. The use of art for political means, of course, goes back to the days of early civilizations like Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt, when leaders ordered the production of works in sculpture and architecture to proclaim the grand magnitude of their leadership and inspire obedience amongst the people they ruled. In modern times, those in power utilized printmaking to sway public opinion through short, yet effective graphic design, as

exemplified by early twentieth century recruitment posters that vilified foreign enemies and encouraged staunch patriotism.⁹ This kind of political print represents the work of people working for state funded advertisement campaigns promoting government administrations and their policies.

This study, however, looks at the opposite kind of political print. The works that fall under this kind of print take an oppositional viewpoint, one belonging to real people not in power. They make deliberate and unambiguous political proclamations, often in the name of human rights, that represent the thoughts and desires of autonomous individuals. Prior to the advent of online connectivity, the most effective media platforms for communicating with large-scale audiences (television and radio) remained mainly in the control of those possessing wealth and power. By comparison, printmaking proved quite accessible to individuals operating at the grassroots level, allowing for competition against policy makers who failed to listen to the problems affecting their more underrepresented constituents. It is this uphill struggle from the perspective of the socially and politically marginalized that not only makes these prints far more fascinating than their state-sponsored counterparts, but also adds to the question of how to properly display them as art.¹⁰

Cultural historian George Lipsitz concisely identifies the two attributes of political prints that account for their popular use by underrepresented groups and the social

⁹ Stephen J. Eskilson, *Graphic Design: A New History, Second Edition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 116.

¹⁰ Art historian Jennifer A. Gonzalez tackles a similar question as well in her 2008 book, *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art*. Looking at five artists from culturally diverse backgrounds, Gonzalez demonstrates how their work highlights the influence of a museum's display narrative.

movements they belong to: inexpensiveness and reproducibly.¹¹ As illustrated by the work of groups like the Black Panthers and the United Farm Workers, the need to contend with those possessing greater media access led to these movements finding economical ways of getting their messages out into the world. The screenprinted poster proved an especially practical format for people in the twentieth century. With easily constructed equipment and the capability of printing large multi-color posters without the need of an elaborate studio,¹² screenprinting allowed anyone with the need, but not necessarily the money, to produce eye-catching graphics via affordable means.¹³

A poster like *Cesar Chavez at S.F.S.U. Gym* (1976), created to advertise a talk by the leader of the United Farm Workers on an upcoming vote affecting the rights of farm workers, made for an affordable yet effective way to reach the public on behalf of people with no other means to do so (fig. 2). Considering that a lot of the issues raised by social and political movements in the twentieth century sprung from economic disparities, it comes as no surprise that they chose to harness the power of printmaking to communicate their ideals and gain greater exposure.

¹¹ George Lipsitz, "Not Just Another Poster Movement: Poster Art and the Movimiento Chicano," in *Not Just Another Poster: Chicano Graphic Arts in California*, ed. Chon Noriega (Santa Barbara, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 72.

¹² John Ross and Clare Romano, *The Complete Screenprint and Lithograph* (New York: The Free Press, 1972), 5.

¹³ Lipsitz, 72.

Fig. 2: La Raza Silkscreen Center. *Cesar Chavez at S.F.S.U. Gym*. 1970. Silkscreen. From the All of Us or None archive of the Oakland Museum of California, <http://collections.museumca.org/?q=category/2011-schema/history/political-posters>.

There then lies the importance of reproducibility in political prints. The power to create multiple copies of the same text + image to disseminate out into the world appealed and continues to appeal greatly to the underrepresented, even if such a quality was originally looked down upon in the art community. Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay, "The Works of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility," now of course a seminal work in the study of art history, remains a useful argument for understanding the value of this power. Identifying aura, or uniqueness, as a standard utilized in the art community for measuring an artwork's value, Benjamin argued that reproducible media possessed its own and opposite value, namely the democratic appeal of being able to reach a far greater audience than a single, unique work ever could (cult vs. exhibition

value).¹⁴ For social and political movements of the twentieth century, this quality proved not only useful, but also symbolic of their democratic intentions.

With regards to the actual graphics, the activists of the 1960s knew full well of the persuasive power of the poster format, harnessed and maximized to great effect after the development of lithography in the late 1700s and the centuries that followed. Because of the immense number of American artists and collectives working independently of not just the government, but of one another, the overall body of political printed work shows the use of many different styles and iconographies for catching the attention of the everyday person and communicating politically charged messages. Certainly these individuals inspired one another, even collaborating on occasion. But compared to the collective prints produced in other countries, those of the United States demonstrated the greatest range and diversity.

Nonetheless, this diversity in style resulted in at least one interesting point of similarity. As established, the political prints of this study spoke to *and* for the underrepresented, the powerless, and the marginalized. The timing for this was in no way coincidental, as the 1960s saw the rise of nonconformist attitudes challenging the norms of popular culture as well as to those of the socio-political landscape. Just as with the psychedelic rock posters of artists like Victor Moscoso, the political prints of this era drew on subcultural aesthetics that appealed to a new generation of radical youths. These people understood what attracted the audiences they wished to build and unite for their

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, "The Works of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility," in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Donald Preziosi (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2009), 438.

specific causes. One additionally includes cultural iconography in this discussion of audience-seeking print aesthetics. Whether through cultural symbols like the calaveras of the Chicano poster artists or simply depicting the people of their own community like the Black Panthers, these aesthetics worked similarly and just as affectively for their intended audiences as those of rock posters and underground comix. This appeal to subculture as opposed to dominant culture distinguishes this kind of art and its visual language.

Douglas's *Untitled (On the Bones of the Oppressors)*, for example, depicts a Black Panther Party member raising a firearm while screaming in an act of government defiance. The pose signals anger and unrest, to the point of promoting militaristic action. Such a universal pose evokes the prints of German Expressionist Käthe Kollwitz, denouncing the German Kaiser, and Chinese woodcut artist Li Hua, inspired by Kollwitz in his critiques of the Nanjing Government. Douglas includes a quote by Communist leader Joseph Stalin calling for self-rule by the people and forceful removal of those in power. The flat, radiating lines of color that accentuate the figure hark back to the Socialist Constructivist posters that spread such messages to the people. For Douglas's intended audience, this combination of the image, the text, and the references behind them aimed to spark action and escape from the oppressed margins of society.

Douglas, who worked with the Black Panthers under the title "Minister of Culture," also illustrates another matter to consider with regards to how to refer to individuals who made these prints. While the term "artist" is certainly applicable to many of them and can arguably be extended to cover anyone who designed a political print, referring to them as simply "real people" seems to carry more weight in relation to the democratic aspects of

the prints. Created to reach a wide audience and communicate the plight of the marginalized, political prints inherently revolve around the interactions of real people. There is no isolation and no art for art's sake. The maker of such a print purposefully positions him or herself in relation to the people he or she wishes to represent and the people he or she wishes to communicate with. For that democratic reason, the term "real people" describes these individuals best.

The history of activism through political printmaking goes as far back as the Protestant Reformation, when Martin Luther collaborated with Lucas Cranach the Elder to create pamphlets criticizing the questionable dealings of the pope and the Catholic Church through both writing and illustration (fig. 3 & 4).¹⁵ From then onwards, a history of politically infused printmaking developed from sources all over the world, as in the work of William Hogarth, Francisco Goya, and the Americans who contributed to the socialist magazine *The Masses*.¹⁶ The power of the reproducible print inherently lent itself to defiant political expression by artists, activists, and social commentators throughout history. While the question of display raised by this study could be applied to many of these other works as well, the focus here lies with political prints produced during the late twentieth century, beginning with the 1960s.

¹⁵ Linda Hults, *The Print in the Western World: An Introductory History*, (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 103.

¹⁶ Deborah Wye, *Committed to Print: Social and Political Themes in Recent American Printed Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1988), 7.

Fig. 3 (left): Martin Luther [author] and Lucas Cranach the Elder [illustrator]. Page from *Passional Christi und Antichristi*. 1521. Woodcut. From the collection of the British Library, www.bl.uk.

Fig. 4 (right): Martin Luther [author] and Lucas Cranach the Elder [illustrator]. Page from *Passional Christi und Antichristi*. 1521. Woodcut. From the collection of the British Library, www.bl.uk.

In the history of political printmaking, this decade stands above all others thanks to an incredible surge in production of this art at this time, referred to by some collectors and museums as the “Political Poster Renaissance.”¹⁷ Growing political activism in the 1960s fueled this renaissance, with more and more movements emerging and advocating for greater attention to issues like war, race, gender, and sexuality.¹⁸ While political prints possessed little to no presence in early campaigns like the Free Speech Movement, many

¹⁷ Michael Rossman, “On the Character of the American Political Poster Renaissance,” *AOUON Archive*, accessed June 15, 2017, <http://www.mrossman.org/posters/characterrenaissance.html>. Rossman was a leader of the Free Speech Movement and collector of political posters. His collection, now housed by OMCA, will be discussed in Part II.

¹⁸ Susan Martin, “Introduction: The Left Turn,” in *Decade of Protest: Political Posters from the United States, Viet Nam, Cuba 1965-1975*, ed. Susan Martin (Santa Monica, CA: Smart Art Press, 1996), 13.

later movements turned to the use of prints by mid decade, continuing into the 1970s and beyond.¹⁹

The United States, the leading democratic superpower during the Cold War, experienced some of the most notable social movements of the 1960s. Moreover, efforts to collect and preserve the political prints of this era by American archives like the United States Library of Congress, the UCLA Library, and the collections looked at within this study testify to their vast and continued survival in the present day.²⁰ While activists in countries like France, Cuba, and Vietnam certainly hold a significant place in the history of political print production, the United States presents one of the more extensive case studies in terms of not only the collecting of prints, but also the diversity of issues that they tackled. As the examples of this study will show, both American movements of the 1960s and American collectors in the present recognize and share in the global network of political print production that grew out of this era.²¹

While the mid 1960s makes for a good starting point for the study of this art, identifying an ending point proves trickier. While many social movements continued into the 1970s and even the 1980s, they no longer possessed the same fervor present in the decade that started it all. The rise of computers in the 1970s and 1980s also immensely transformed mass communication.²² The physical printed graphic gave way to the

¹⁹ Lincoln Cushing, *All of Us or None: Social Justice Posters of the San Francisco Bay Area* (Berkeley, CA: Heyday, 2012), 5. Some notable collectives include the Art Workers' Coalition founded in the 1960s, the Royal Chicano Air Force founded in the 1970s, and the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) founded in the 1980s.

²⁰ Rossman.

²¹ Cushing, *All of Us or None: Social Justice Posters of the San Francisco Bay Area*, 89.

²² Eskilson, 349.

electronic graphic, capable of reaching even greater numbers of people at faster (instantaneous) rates than ever before. Yet, some still argue that this “Political Poster Renaissance” that began almost half a century ago continues to this day.²³ While the moment of the 1960s now lies dormant, the tradition of social activism continues as long as human conflict continues. Whether one looks at the Occupy movement, Black Lives Matter, or LGBT Spirit Day, one sees the spirit of collective civil unrest still present in today’s society. Graphics going digital arguably represent a continuation of past traditions, as they carry the same qualities of inexpensiveness and reproducibility associated with physical political prints.²⁴

Determining an exact timeframe then seems counterproductive, as it threatens to place an expiration date on the phenomenon of political print production that is by no means dead. The majority of the prints that appear in this study fall between the mid 1960s and early 1980s. But just as examples of prints from outside the United States crop up, so too examples from the 1980s and onward remain included, illustrating the existing extension of this kind of art into the twenty-first century.

The consideration of political prints as art continues to grow within the field of art history. Printmaking in general, though practiced by many major names of the Western canon since its development, lay in the margins of that canon as a sort of side hobby to more so-called important media like painting and sculpture.²⁵ When political functionality comes into play, these works face relegation to political history, graphic

²³ Rossman.

²⁴ Saunders and Miles, 11.

²⁵ Ironically, this is a result of the very same reasons explained above that make the medium so invaluable (inexpensiveness and reproducibility).

design, advertisement, but not “fine art.” However, changes in the contemporary art world, fittingly beginning around the 1960s, now allow for a rethinking of these objects as art as well. Following the decline in popularity of Abstract Expressionism and painting in general, new experimentations in medium by Rauschenberg, Warhol, and the Fluxus artists gave way to a new inclusivity for defining art that helped elevate printmaking in the now global art world. As interest in the political prints of the 1960s and their collections continue to grow, studies like this one need also continue finding how to incorporate them into the discussion of art history, while not ignoring the very qualities that make them so interesting and unique.

Part I: *Committed to Print* at The Museum of Modern Art

This first case study looks at a political print exhibition within the context of a major American art museum, in this case, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. MOMA achieved a true milestone for such institutions when it organized *Committed to Print: Social and Political Themes in Recent American Printed Art*, which ran from January 31 to April 19, 1988. As the title indicates, *Committed to Print* surveyed American political printed art created as far back as the 1960s, making it one of the earliest exhibitions by a major American art museum to do so.²⁶ With a longstanding view of museums as arbiters of culture and knowledge, this example demonstrates what happens when these kinds of objects find themselves displayed within one of the most powerful and influential institutions in the art world. One finds that the museum's deep-rooted association with the defining of Modern art ultimately becomes projected onto these prints by way of this exhibition.

Deborah Wye, then Associate Curator of Prints and Illustrated Books, organized *Committed to Print* and described the goal of the exhibition in the following way:

Approbation, inquiry, and dissent are among the functions performed by the printed works discussed here. The art works are presented in terms of these functions, with particular emphasis on their subject matter: significant issues and events of our time. In recent years many artists have made social and political concerns a focal point of their artistic activity. Yet often in the modern period art has fulfilled other, less clearly social aims, a reflection of a preoccupation with the pleasure or provocation of the eye as an end in itself and with the concept of "art for art's sake." The art studied here, by contrast, was largely created to be, as one artist put it, "a kind of instrument in the world."²⁷

²⁶ Allan Schwartzman, "Committed to Print," *The Print Collector's Newsletter* 19, no. 2 (1988): 41, <http://www.jstor.org.libaccess.sjlibrary.org/stable/24553612>.

²⁷ Deborah Wye, *Committed to Print: Social and Political Themes in Recent American Printed Art*, 7.

This dig at Modern art with “less clearly social aims” demonstrates Wye’s support for more politically oriented art. It also makes for an early insight into the contention that an exhibition like this one faces in this kind of setting.

Throughout her 31-year career as a curator at MOMA, Wye seemed dedicated to expanding the public’s understanding of print media.²⁸ Aided by the growing willingness of curators to blur the lines between previously strict department walls,²⁹ Wye organized print exhibitions at MOMA in order to communicate their presence in “the whole story” of Modern and Contemporary art, both as stand-alone art works and in relation to other media.³⁰ *Committed to Print* belongs to this body of curatorial work that looked inquisitively at printmaking.

In total, MOMA assembled 168 prints to place on display, bringing together the works of 108 individuals and sixteen collectives. All of these names worked within the United States at the time of the exhibition, meaning that the works featured here concerned issues prominent to this country, though Wye notes that these issues extended globally as well. In organizing the prints, Wye and MOMA elected to structure the exhibition by theme rather than style, date of execution, or maker. Thus, the end result showcased the works around six categories: Governments and Leaders; Race and Culture; Gender; Nuclear Power and Ecology; War and Revolution; and Economics,

²⁸ Susan Tallman and Deborah Wye, “Embracing the Whole Story: A Conversation with Deborah Wye,” *Art in Print* 1, no. 1 (2011): 10.
<http://www.jstor.org.libaccess.sjlibrary.org/stable/43045171>.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

Class Struggle, and the American Dream.³¹ The museum placed any prints that transcended these categories at the entrance of the gallery space as a sort of introductory section.³² Nonetheless, all prints featured took an oppositional position to the abuse of power and defended the real people who suffer because of it (fig. 5).³³

Fig. 5: Installation view of *Committed to Print*. January 31, 1988 through April 19, 1988. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photographic Archive. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. Photographer: Katherine Keller. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY. Reproduced with permission.

³¹ Schwartzman., 7-9.

³² For example, *Signs* (1970) by Robert Rauschenberg presents a collage of images representing the 1960s (and therefore applicable to multiple categories), including soldiers in Vietnam, John F. Kennedy, the moon landing, and the death of Martin Luther King Jr.

³³ Wye, *Committed to Print*, 7.

The museum's rationale for holding this exhibition, therefore, begins with an interest in the history of these prints as images of protest against abuse. They highlight three decades of social and political issues as viewed from a liberal perspective and expressed via a medium known for its ability to disseminate such views. Still, Wye acknowledges the low regard these prints receive as art objects, and employs two main arguments to counter this claim: first, she establishes a historical connection between the works in this exhibition and those produced by celebrated individuals like Lucas Cranach the Elder of Germany, Honoré Daumier of France, and José Guadalupe Posada of Mexico; second, she identifies how the prints communicate their concerns through the language of modernism, such as through collage, rhythmic patterns of imagery or lines of text, and expressionist gestures.³⁴

The purpose of *Committed to Print* was to not only display this kind of art, but also to establish it as worthy of display within an art institution like this one. Wye understood the conflict created by holding an exhibition of objects like political prints in an art museum, especially one with the history and reputation that MOMA possesses. This museum, as an institution that operated under "a complex modernist aesthetic construct" for representing the history of art in the twentieth century, now had to incorporate objects that criticized dominant institutions, represented marginalized people, and were rarely included with the dominant canon.³⁵ This exhibition saw its organizers take on the task of presenting an accurate image of the history and meaning of political prints while also consolidating said

³⁴ Ibid., 7-8.

³⁵ Alan Wallach, "The Museum of Modern Art: The Past's Future," *Journal of Design History* 5, no. 3 (1992): 208. <http://www.jstor.org.libaccess.sjlibrary.org/stable/1315838>.

history and meaning with the art-driven institutional narrative already present within the museum.

“The Foremost Museum of Modern Art in the World”

While MOMA’s name and mission statement explain what to expect of the art within its walls, its history reveals the complex development that its narrative underwent prior to holding *Committed to Print*.³⁶ At its inception in 1929, and with major backing from the influential Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, Lillie Bliss, and Mary Quinn Sullivan, MOMA hired a young and innovative Alfred H. Barr to serve as director of this new museum. With the story of Modern art still in the process of being written, MOMA began a roughly ninety-year enterprise of exhibiting the recent trends of the art world while establishing the fundamental characteristics utilized in the study of art history for defining Modernism.³⁷

This feat necessarily involved the customary process of subjecting a heterogeneous set of objects to the systematizing procedures “that characterize the museum as a cultural institution.”³⁸ MOMA’s early curators took into consideration the many differences in medium, artist, and style of each object and organized them in such a way (through department headings and classifications still utilized in museums today) that unified them under the dominant identity that they wished to establish for the museum in the 1930s. From this identity emerged a history and an aesthetic of Modernism organized around

³⁶ Said mission statement proudly declares: “Founded in 1929 as an educational institution, the Museum of Modern Art is dedicated to being the foremost museum of modern art in the world.”

³⁷ Michelle Elligott, “Showcasing Modernism—From Berlin to New York,” *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen* 52 (2010): 107, <http://www.jstor.org.libaccess.sjlibrary.org/stable/41431602>.

³⁸ Wallach, “The Museum of Modern Art: The Past’s Future,” 208.

key movements like Fauvism, Cubism, and Surrealism as a basis for reflecting the period and determining how the Modern art museum would look and operate in the twentieth century.³⁹ Barr and the rest of MOMA's founders laid the foundation for the institution's narrative.

MOMA expressed great ambition in its infancy. It aimed to lead the way for museums devoted to the art of the present and years to come. It accomplished this through a breakdown and mapping of the major art movements happening at the moment, including an almost accurate projection of the future of abstraction.⁴⁰ Yet despite this seemingly open and progressive eye for the new and contemporary production of art, by the time *Committed to Print* rolled around in the late 1980s, such an exhibition still managed to challenge the narrative at MOMA. Political prints never really garnered a place amongst the collection, at least, in term of classifying them *as* political prints and not something else. The history of this museum proves more complex, of course. Examining said history in relation to an exhibition like *Committed to Print* allows for a better understanding of why MOMA had yet to give consideration to political prints until this point.

Before getting back into the prints of the exhibition itself, this discussion of MOMA's history necessitates a look at the beginnings of MOMA's Department of Prints and Illustrated Books (now merged with Drawings), the closest option available for

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Alfred H. Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936), 200. Abstraction certainly continued onward through the legacy of the Abstract Expressionists, albeit with their own variations that differed from the modern artists of the first few decades in the twentieth century.

categorizing these works. The department's opening closely followed that of the museum, thanks again to the support of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller. Her initial donation of over 1,600 prints, mostly by American artists, began the department's eventual growth towards housing tens of thousands of prints today.⁴¹ In particular, Mrs. Rockefeller pursued the collecting of prints for their aesthetic pleasures as well as their accessibility to the public, a quality that gave them a social dimension that appealed to her interest in social causes pertaining to the common people.⁴² In 1999, Wye curated the exhibition *Abby Aldrich Rockefeller and Print Collecting: An Early Mission for MOMA*, which featured many of the etchings, drypoints, and lithographs by artists like social realists John Sloan and Edward Hopper that Mrs. Rockefeller first donated.

MOMA's earliest print curators aimed to legitimize prints as major works of art, while more recent archivists and curators like Wye reveal an exploration of both the medium by itself and in relation to other art-making processes.⁴³ The elevation of printmaking as a medium extends across the museum's history. Nevertheless, the most interesting point about MOMA's relationship with prints lies in the museum's method for defining the word "print," a matter made especially prominent in *Committed to Print*.

The exhibition's survey presented a wide range of print types. This illustrated the amount of exploration and innovation that artists achieved throughout the history of the

⁴¹ Deborah Wye and Audrey Isselbacher, "Abby Aldrich Rockefeller and Print Collecting: An Early Mission for MoMA," *MoMA* 2, no. 5 (1999): 10.
<http://www.jstor.org.libaccess.sjlibrary.org/stable/4420361>.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 8-10. Rockefeller specifically took interest in issues relating to workers, women, and children, which makes it interesting to wonder what her reaction would be to the use of prints for social and political causes.

⁴³ Tallman and Wye, 10.

medium, and especially as practiced from the 1960s to the 1980s.⁴⁴ From older methods to more modern ones, *Committed to Print* featured everything from woodcuts and etchings to lithographs and digital prints.⁴⁵ Formats also ranged from more fine art prints to posters, stencils, and even stamps and subway-car placards.

This gives an important insight into MOMA's perception of political prints. The museum addresses all these works as "prints," making for a very inclusive definition of the term. Of course, one tends to consider major art collections as being exclusive about what gets in, which again speaks to the rarity of this kind of exhibition. Still, the decision to label objects such as posters or billboards with a term historically applied to more so-called "fine" works, like engravings, seems surprising. By displaying these formats all together under the same label, *Committed to Print* suggests an equivalence of classification amongst these works.

This conforms to the purpose of wanting to elevate political prints to the point of being worthy of display. Rather than labeling these objects under something like "multiples" or "works on paper," Wye and MOMA utilize the term "print" to position these less traditional formats on the same level as the fine prints that already possess a history of esteem within this museum.⁴⁶ The most positive outcome of this is the ability

⁴⁴ Wye, *Committed to Print*, 8.

⁴⁵ Of the newer techniques, the exhibition featured Alfredo Jaar's two-part panel from the project *Rushes* that he made using electrostatic dot plotting (computer print) in 1986.

⁴⁶ One can compare this to the incorporation of posters by Cheret and Toulouse-Lautrec into the Western art canon. Despite having been made as cheap broadsides, the works of the artists became associated with a major movement (Art Nouveau) in the progression of the Western canon. MOMA pushed to associate the works in this exhibition with "prints," as in "fine prints," to elevate them in the eyes of the public.

to demonstrate the many methods utilized to spread political messages during the second half of the twentieth century without restriction to a single format.

In addition to spotlighting single prints, the exhibition also brought attention to the often-ignored artist's book. Thirty-five artist's books appeared on display and listed in the show's catalog. Wye acknowledges the prominence these books achieved in the late 1960s and early 1970s "when there were hopes that the medium might emerge as a significant populist art form that could bypass the commercial gallery system."⁴⁷ Though capable for consideration as art in their own right, many of these artist's books presented documentation of important artistic explorations as well.⁴⁸ These books thus present an instance of distinction made amongst different sets of artworks in this exhibition, as far as defining and displaying them as political prints is concerned.⁴⁹

Wye attained many of the prints featured in the exhibition from the collection belonging to Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PAD/D), a radical artist collective based in New York during the 1980s that aimed to archive the political art of their time.⁵⁰ When *Committed to Print* came to fruition in 1988, PAD/D no longer operated as an active group, but their archive committee remained diligent in maintaining their repository of political art. Just one year after Wye and MOMA organized *Committed to*

⁴⁷ Wye, *Committed to Print*, 9.

⁴⁸ Schwartzman, 41.

⁴⁹ MOMA's name for the department suggests "prints and illustrated books" possess very similar classifications; Wye likely considers the books on the same level as everything else labeled a print here.

⁵⁰ Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (New York: Pluto Press, 2011), 49.

Print with the help of their archive, members of PAD/D donated it to the museum's library collection and thus ensured the preservation of the group's legacy.⁵¹

As a major source for the prints featured in the exhibition, PAD/D, alongside MOMA, projected its own narrative onto *Committed to Print* as well. As dictated by the collective in 1981 when describing their mission in their first newsletter:

PAD (Political Art Documentation/Distribution) is an artists' resource and networking organization coming out of and into New York City. Our main goal is to provide artists with an organized relationship to society; one way we are doing this is by building a collection of documentation of international socially-concerned art. PAD defines "social concern" in the broadest sense, as any work that deals with issues—ranging from sexism and racism to ecological damage or other forms of human oppression.⁵²

This statement parallels the one made by Wye in the catalog, sharing a concern for human oppression and the desire to document it. The curator likely received some level of inspiration for organizing *Committed to Print* from the collective and what they stood for.⁵³ The exhibition's purpose and focus on political prints stem, to some degree, from goals outlined by PAD/D. Wye projects the strong political narrative belonging to PAD/D onto the narrative of MOMA through the prints it borrowed.

As with the kinds of prints, one finds variety in the real people represented in this exhibition. Of the combined 124 individuals and collectives featured, *Committed to Print* included eleven who were Black, sixteen who were Hispanic, three who were Native

⁵¹ Gregory Sholette, "A Collectography of PAD/D, Political Art Documentation and Distribution: A 1980's Activist Art and Networking Collective," *gregorysholette.com*, 2001, http://www.gregorysholette.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/14_collectography1.pdf.

⁵² Julie Ault, *Alternative Art New York, 1965-1985: A Cultural Politics Book for the Social Text Collective* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 103.

⁵³ Considering that the PAD/D archive would be donated to the museum a year later, Wye must have revered the collective and its goals, leading her to establish a relationship between them and MOMA.

American, and seven who were Asian American, with almost half of all of them being female, making this one of the most diverse exhibitions ever held at MOMA.⁵⁴ This attempt at diversity in the roster by Wye and MOMA demonstrates a historical understanding over this kind of art. The radical politics of the New Left in the 1960s incorporated and inspired minorities to make their previously unheard voices heard. The inclusion of so many different people ultimately reflects these voices.

In conjunction with this level of integration, the variety of people selected for this exhibition included well-known artists like Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenburg, and Nancy Spero, but also featured the likes of lesser-known individuals at the time, such as Carlos Irizarry, Anton van Dalen, and Janet Koenig. Again, this resulted from the focus of the exhibition, as those who specialized in political printmaking suddenly received a platform on which to appear within MOMA. While reaching a wide audience is the purpose behind the prints, displaying them on such a grand stage furthers their reach even more. This decision to exhibit people never previously featured here thus shows some effort by the museum to branch out beyond its regulars, though said effort does come with its own shortcomings.

In truth, surveying recognizable people alongside the not-so-recognizable ones fails to accurately represent the real people most active in the production of political prints during the second half of the twentieth century. An example of this occurs with the inclusion of Frank Stella's *Attica Defense Fund* (1975), an offset print originally created to raise defense funds for the lawyers of inmates involved in the 1971 Attica prison

⁵⁴ Schwartzman, 41-42.

uprising.⁵⁵ While Stella's work certainly relates to the theme of the exhibition and exemplifies the popular and productive use of prints as fundraisers, its inclusion comes off as an attempt to add prestige to works by more obscure individuals and collectives.⁵⁶ Featured artist Christy Rupp noted how the show portrays the "stars" as central to the political prints of this period, even though those with relatively less fame produced the most effective prints, at least in her opinion.⁵⁷ Major artists like Stella and Warhol certainly did not dedicate the entirety of their art practice towards political causes. One can argue their political works thus possess less fervor compared to that of others.

Further supporting this claim is the absence of any anonymous prints in the exhibition. Again, makers of political prints created them for the moment, meaning artistic authorship mattered little if at all. And while possessing the name of a person as big as Stella might have contributed to the survival of many of the works in this exhibition, the ability to collect and/or display anonymous prints was certainly not an unviable task.⁵⁸ MOMA intentionally left out anonymous works in favor of those attached to the name of someone recognizable, a definite misrepresentation of the history of political prints. This shows the value that this institution placed on works with a traceable history, at least as far as this exhibition was concerned.

⁵⁵ Wye, *Committed to Print*, 32.

⁵⁶ Schwartzman, 42.

⁵⁷ Nancy Princenthal, "Political Prints: An Opinion Poll," *The Print Collector's Newsletter* 19, no. 2 (1988): 47. <http://www.jstor.org.libaccess.sjlibrary.org/stable/24553613>. Rupp points out the failure by the museum to include the Guerilla Girls in this exhibition, especially considering the turbulent relationship MOMA itself has with them.

⁵⁸ As the next two sections demonstrate, the exhibitions at OMCA and CSPG both included anonymous works. Furthermore, MOMA itself has a history of displaying and collecting anonymous works, so why not include them here as well?

Thinking back to the beginnings of MOMA's narrative, the importance of displaying and collecting works with notable histories stems from a desire to historicize their collection.⁵⁹ When organizing its artworks, during its early years, around the movements of Modern art, MOMA specifically organized itself around the names that made the movements worth historicizing. Established individuals like Arp and Picasso provided a foundation for which to branch out this new consideration of Modern art, thereby opening the doors for other individuals whose work shared the formal language necessary to be categorized and displayed alongside them.⁶⁰ This same strategy appears to take effect in *Committed to Print*, as MOMA hovers close to its familiar territory (situated around its Stellas, Rauschenbergs, and Warhols) before completely committing to the new (such as Irazarri and Koenig) and the unknown or anonymous. Including some of these stars does not necessarily hurt the exhibition as long as emphasis is placed on the bigger role that non-stars played.

The misrepresentation runs deeper than just the history, unfortunately. One of the fundamental characteristics of prints also gets overlooked: their value as a democratic form of art. The accessibility of political printmaking techniques like silkscreen printing allowed virtually anyone the ability to produce and disseminate prints. By displaying too many works by "stars" compared to those by lesser-known or anonymous individuals, MOMA failed to fully illustrate the democratic potential offered through this kind of art

⁵⁹ A "notable history" here does not necessarily exclude just anonymous works. This can also mean some of the lesser-known individuals mentioned above as well.

⁶⁰ Barr, 14.

that real people from the 1960s to 1980s took advantage of in order to spread their social and political messages out into the world.

Organizing the prints around six thematic categories made for the most sensible and appropriate method. While some possessed more than one work within the show, to arrange the prints by the 124 individuals and collectives would be far too chaotic.⁶¹ And while style, print media, and chronology all make for structured means to present these works, their political nature remains the predominant unifying factor in this exhibition. Any other way distorts the emphasis placed on this. For example, displaying Peter Saul's *Politics* next to William Wiley's *Three Mile Island, Three Years Later* just because both are lithographs or because both were made in 1984 draws attention away from the political condemnation going on in the former print and the ominous warning against the use of nuclear power in the latter. The six categories ensure that viewers understand that it is the expression of political opinion for the sake of galvanizing political support that lies at the heart of this show.

Furthermore, they offer the opportunity to view the different artistic reactions to similar issues. Under the Nuclear Power/Ecology section, for example, viewers see how people utilized different printmaking techniques with their own stylistic intricacies to produce etchings, lithographs, woodcuts, stencils, and silkscreens all associated with the anti-nuclear movement that peaked during the 1970s and 1980s.⁶²

With all that said, *Committed to Print*'s organization still raises some red flags. On one hand, one finds the argument that the exhibition's categories fail to go far enough in

⁶¹ Not surprisingly, the people that were featured multiple times fall under the "stars" label.

⁶² Wye, *Committed to Print*, 60-66.

regards to the topics they cover. Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston, members of activist group ACT UP, criticized MOMA for not including any AIDS activist graphics amongst those displayed.⁶³ Why limit the prints to just those that fall within and across the six categories? Perhaps Wye and MOMA chose the topics they felt represented the most prominent issues during the past three decades of political printmaking, resulting in the omission of issues like LGBT, animal, and disability rights, to name a few. The global impact felt by the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s proves otherwise, however. Regardless of why the museum included some political prints and not others, the exhibition opens itself to criticism from those not represented.

On the other hand, and perhaps the bigger of these two conflicts, the museum goes *too* far in its desire to represent multiple issues. Les Levine, who featured in the exhibition, noted the following upon viewing the show: “All those things at the Modern look very neutral, in retrospect, and the danger of having so many prints of that nature is that they really sometimes blur political issues.”⁶⁴ The exhibition highlights political art, *period*. In attempting to make a show *about* political prints, MOMA fails to sufficiently emphasize the political issues *in* the prints. For example, Levine’s *Block God* (1985), when displayed as a single billboard in its original setting, tackles the issues of violence and civil strife that plagued his home country of Ireland (fig. 6).⁶⁵ On its own in its intended urban context, the message stands clear. When surrounded by so many prints dealing with other issues like race, gender, and government, the message specific to

⁶³ Sholette, *Dark Matter*, 46.

⁶⁴ Princenthal, 46.

⁶⁵ Wye, *Committed to Print*, 76.

Levine's print unfortunately becomes overpowered, drowned out, and fades in importance (fig. 7). *Committed to Print* features *Block God* because it is political, not because of *why* it is political.

Fig. 6: Les Levine. *Block God*. Installed in London, 1985. Silkscreen. Copyright Les Levine 1985. Reproduced with permission.

Digital Image © 2018 MoMA, N.Y.

This image will display properly on a monitor calibrated to 5500 K, 2.2 gamma when using the embedded working space profile

Fig. 7: Installation view of *Committed to Print*. January 31, 1988 through April 19, 1988. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photographic Archive. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. Photographer: Katherine Keller. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY. Reproduced with permission.

Intent remains key. Based on the curator's attempt to link these prints with canonical works from the Renaissance to Modernism, Wye and, by extension, MOMA looked to establish political prints as historically important objects in the eyes of their audience. Thus, rather than turning this exhibition into one about just war or just race, the museum surveyed prints across multiple issues in order to emphasize their political nature in a broad sense. Unfortunately, the act of brushing aside the individual messages for the sake of the bigger picture consequently hurts them as objects of politics in the present. The six

categories constructed in the exhibition attempted to bring a bit of order and attention to the issues, but they ultimately failed to look deeper than just the category name.⁶⁶ While viewers learned that Levine's *Block God* relates to the topic of "War and Revolution," their ability to comprehend his intention to push the conflict in Ireland into the collective consciousness faced the matter of overcoming all the other messages fighting for attention, and thus getting the viewer to look beyond the idea that this print is nothing more than an object of art on display.

MOMA's Politics on Display

This last point returns to the museum's history and the development of its narrative. It also makes visible the narrative in a tangible sense, found via the physical design of the museum.

The full history of MOMA tells a story of an institution that underwent major shifts in its own self-perception. When first designing its innovative art space, MOMA displayed a radical, even utopian approach to the display of art in the modern era. By the 1950s, however, innovation gave way to steadfastness. Having successfully led the way for American painting to rise to the pinnacle of the art world, MOMA now pursued a status quo where, just like American painting, it remained on top as an art institution.⁶⁷ From radically establishing a modernist hegemony, to conservatively preserving the formalism it championed, the museum welcomed an atmosphere in which questioning the existing state of things (ironically, the very thing that the works in *Committed to Print* set out to accomplish) proved unfavorable to its power and influence.

⁶⁶ Schwartzman, 43.

⁶⁷ Wallach, "The Museum of Modern Art: The Past's Future," 209-210.

By the 1960s and 1970s, changes in the art world that many art historians now define as the beginnings of Postmodernism coincided with the radical social and political movements occurring around the United States. MOMA itself felt the sting of opposition during this time from leftist artists critical of museum institutions and the trustees that governed them. The most notable incident occurred at the turn of the decade when the New York-based artist collective known as the Art Workers' Coalition looked to MOMA to co-sponsor the anti-Vietnam War poster *Q: And Babies? A: And Babies*, which featured a documentary photograph of the My Lai Massacre overlain by quoted text from a television interview about the event with army officer Paul Meadlo. The museum's board members, unwilling to associate MOMA with such a strong political stance, refused to print the posters. In response, the AWC targeted the museum by printing the posters through other means and holding a protest where Picasso's *Guernica* hung within MOMA (fig. 8).⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 20-22.

Fig. 8: Demonstration at the Museum of Modern Art in front of Picasso's *Guernica* by the Art Workers' Coalition. January 3, 1970. Photo copyright Jan van Raay. Reproduced with permission.

Incidents like this signaled yet another shift in the way MOMA operated. In addition to taking on contemporary art movements that rejected midcentury formalism, MOMA faced a period of institutional critique for decisions that artists and activists considered more favorable to the institution instead of the art and art makers that it championed. These fluctuations in the museum's goals generated a display environment that at certain points in its history proved inviting to some art and less favorable to others. Because an institution's narrative necessarily comprises both its present display environment and the display environment of its past, innovative exhibitions like *Committed to Print* pose and face a bit of a challenge when harmonizing with the institution.

Caught in the middle of this changing narrative are all the institutions and the public influenced by MOMA. Duncan and Wallach identify MOMA as providing the prototype

for the Modern art museum, becoming “a model not only for every American city with aspirations to ‘high’ culture but also for every capital of the ‘free world.’”⁶⁹ Neutrality ultimately lies at the heart of this model. In originally designing an art space looking to blaze its own path, MOMA pioneered the so-called “white cube,” an interior space devoid of bias and distraction for viewers to experience and contemplate the art before them as something approaching scientific detachment.⁷⁰ White walls surround the viewer and create a sort of blankness between him or her and the art in an attempt to eliminate context from the viewing experience. With MOMA’s drive to assemble the leading and largest collection of Modern art in the world, this model quickly attained an association with the formalism that dominated Modern art in the mid twentieth century, and arguably continuing even beyond that.

While the decision to display political prints as art does not in and of itself deviate from MOMA’s model, the decision to actually focus *on* the politics of the prints creates some contradiction. The museum’s design, as established, conveys a neutral art space intended for contemplating formal qualities of art. This exhibition, however, displayed a large collection of political art and drew attention to the political themes that tied the works together. In all its years, MOMA’s well-noted emphasis on the formal qualities of art resulted from not just the prominence of formalism in the twentieth century, but also from a museum space that aimed to minimize any slant in the art it displayed by creating a setting for which not to accentuate it. *Committed to Print* breaks away from this. The

⁶⁹ Duncan and Wallach, “The Museum of Modern Art as Late Capitalist Ritual: An Iconographic Analysis,” 485.

⁷⁰ Wallach, “The Museum of Modern Art: The Past’s Future,” 209.

white gallery walls that encouraged viewers to let go of context when viewing a work such as Jackson Pollock's *One: Number 31, 1950* suddenly find that power challenged by an exhibition that encourages viewers to instead consider the political issues in prints such as Ben Shahn's *The Human Relations Portfolio* (1965) and Robert Arneson's *A Nuclear War Head* (1983).⁷¹

The problem lies not with the art, of course. Politics and Modern art go hand in hand, and Contemporary art continues this tradition to arguably greater heights. As alluded to earlier, Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), one of the most famous examples of modern political art ever created, found a home at MOMA from 1939 until 1982.⁷² Even earlier than that, MOMA exhibited *The War: Etchings by Otto Dix* in 1934, an exhibition that made a clear political statement on the horrors of war by a former soldier-turned-artist.⁷³ MOMA's contextual setting displays political art, but more so for its being art and less for its being political. Exhibitions like *The War* and *Committed to Print* contradict this, however. This show takes a print like Arneson's *A Nuclear War Head* and directs the viewer to consider it in terms of its politics, which in this case, revolve around the dangers of nuclear weapons (fig. 5).⁷⁴ The original purpose of the white walls is then ignored.

⁷¹ Shahn's work addresses incidents of racial targeting and discrimination while Arneson's deals with the potential fallout of nuclear war.

⁷² "Guernica Departs MOMA," *MoMA* 21 (1982): 3.

<http://www.jstor.org.libaccess.sjlibrary.org/stable/4380881>.

⁷³ "The War: Etchings by Otto Dix," *MoMA*, July 28-29, 1996, accessed March 2, 2017, https://www.moma.org/d/c/press_releases/W1siZiIsIjMzMzMxMSJdXQ.pdf?sha=73556ec89ca08a31.

⁷⁴ Wye, *Committed to Print*, 61.

Looking back at the changes MOMA experienced throughout its existence, from its radically different take on the modern museum, to its firm promotion of the current trends at mid century, and finally its acceptance of contemporary developments after the 1960s and 1970s, one comprehends the uneasiness of bringing together an exhibition with incredibly political themes and a space intended, at least at one point, for a neutral art viewing experience.

Furthermore, by exhibiting political prints in a setting intended to muffle their content, MOMA risks an oversimplification of these prints as mere objects of art. This becomes especially troubling when considering MOMA's influence. One sees the imitation of its model in many major art museums, such as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art,⁷⁵ and the East Building of the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C.⁷⁶ Museums in the twentieth century aligned the art of their time with the concept of the neutral art space aimed at institutionalizing their collection objects to be viewed as art, even if said objects failed to comply as such. Regardless of whether MOMA intended to influence other institutions or not, the museum unquestionably aimed to exercise influence over the public as a place of learning.⁷⁷ One of the earliest tenets taught to students studying art (and understood by the general public) is the notion that museums function as educational institutions.⁷⁸ They teach people about science, nature, history,

⁷⁵ "Overview," *lacma.org*, accessed March 21, 2017, <http://www.lacma.org/overview>.

⁷⁶ "Welcome to the East Building," *nga.org*, last modified 2017, <https://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/about/welcome-to-the-east-building.html>.

⁷⁷ See MOMA's mission statement.

⁷⁸ For example, such a statement can be found in the first paragraph of the introduction to the Prentice Hall published *Understanding the Art Museum* (2006) booklet by Barbara A. Beall-Fofana.

and of course art. After the openings of early public museums like the British Museum, museums in the West developed into institutions that granted public audiences access to art collections, thereby educating them about art and the canon of art history.⁷⁹ Despite adding its own variations, MOMA continues this tradition of granting everyday citizens access to its collection while informing them of the meaning and importance of the collection objects.

Society, in turn, grants these institutions a high level of trust to provide the most factual information possible. Whatever narrative a museum creates when assembling its collection inevitably affects the collective memory of a society over the collected objects. As in Bal's argument, the prints enter the subjective narrative of MOMA's collection displayed in a space that historically focused on the more formalist qualities of art, thus committing them (no pun intended) to one classification, that of objects of art, more so than the other, that of objects of politics.

Yet, perhaps such a presentation becomes necessary for these objects, at least from the perspective of MOMA. For the audience that does not consider these objects to be art, this exhibition serves to convince them otherwise. And with its reputation, MOMA certainly possesses the power to accentuate the artistic aspects of the prints. As noted earlier, the catalog makes the claim that the people in this exhibition "communicate their concerns in the language of modernism."⁸⁰ Such a statement reconciles the political themes of this exhibition with the dominant Modern art narrative already present at

⁷⁹ Carol Duncan, "From the Princely Gallery to the Public Art Museum: The Louvre Museum and the National Gallery, London," *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, ed. Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publisher, 2004), 252.

⁸⁰ Wye, *Committed to Print*, 8.

MOMA. The exhibition unquestionably makes an effort to acknowledge the prints as objects of politics, again, the thing that makes *Committed to Print* stand out from any other exhibition. Making viewers understand their artistic value, however, was ultimately the bigger concern for MOMA.

Final Thoughts

Committed to Print certainly succeeded in bringing greater attention to political prints created during the second half of the twentieth century. Assisted by the influence that MOMA possesses as an institution in the art world, this exhibition garnered positive, as well as some negative attention, but attention nonetheless.⁸¹ This influence undoubtedly makes for the best argument for holding such an exhibition in this setting. Wye made a wise decision by bringing in prints from the archive of PAD/D, who stood for all the things she wished to introduce to MOMA in this exhibition. And the strategic application of the word “print” to all printed material helped illustrate the democratic power of the medium as used during this era of radical galvanization.

Committed to Print also revealed some important concerns to take into consideration for political print exhibitions in general. For one, the kinds of individuals surveyed reflect the viewer’s understanding of who actually produced these kinds of works. MOMA ignored the history of anonymous prints produced for political issues in favor of more recognizable names. While major artists certainly participated in their production, one

⁸¹ For the most part, the individuals featured in *Committed to Print* praised MOMA for being willing to showcase this kind of art to such a wide audience. Negative reaction came from more conservative observers, such as art critic Roger Kimball of *The New Criterion* who referred to the exhibition, for its audacity to emphasize political art, as MOMA’s “suicide.”

finds political prints associated more with activists, graphic designers, and really just any ordinary citizen with the desire to spread a political message.

Organizing a generalized exhibition on political prints also threatens to leave a skewed understanding for the viewer. Prior to *Committed to Print*, MOMA possessed no substantial history of displaying political prints of this period, at least, not to the point where the museum's audience entered with an established knowledge on the subject. One thus comprehends why MOMA chose a more introductory approach that focused on political prints as a whole without spotlighting a single issue. Still, this exhibition demonstrates the conflicts this creates, either in the inability to cover ALL important political issues or in the drowning out of each issue in attempting to cover too many.

Finally, the existing narrative present at MOMA allowed for emphasizing the artistic aspects in the prints on display. As an institution, MOMA centers its image and curatorial decisions on art. Its mission statement, history, gallery design, existing collection, and overall reputation made for a context in which viewers saw the artistic merits in objects they may not have previously considered art. Still, it remains important not to oversimplify political prints as only one thing or the other. Art and politics are both key components of these prints.

Later developments indicate a continued push towards better incorporation of prints and politics into MOMA's narrative. Wye's 1996 exhibition *Thinking Print: Books to Billboards, 1980-95* saw further exploration of "the role of prints...in contemporary art,"

⁸² albeit with a far more reduced look at the political aspect in them. ⁸³ Exhibitions like *Open Ends* in 2000 (and specifically one of its subsections titled *The Path of Resistance*),⁸⁴ and *Impressions from South Africa, 1965 to Now* in 2011, on the other hand, demonstrated a willingness by MOMA to return to the political again and again throughout the now roughly three decades since *Committed to Print*.⁸⁵ Such progress can be seen as recently as 2017, when the museum reconfigured its fifth floor permanent collection galleries to showcase Contemporary art by artists from countries subject to the travel ban of the Trump Administration.⁸⁶ All of these examples support the notion of an ever-evolving narrative at MOMA that might better accommodate the display of political prints.

⁸² Deborah Wye, *Thinking Print: Books to Billboards, 1980-95* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1996), 7.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸⁴ “Film and Video Series Explores Wide Range of Political Themes Over the Last 40 Years,” *MoMA*, November 2000, accessed March 2, 2017, https://www.moma.org/d/c/press_releases/W1siZiIsIjM4NzA0MiJdXQ.pdf?sha=756fb4db65eaf3da.

⁸⁵ “Impressions from South Africa, 1965 to Now,” *MoMA*, accessed March 21, 2017, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1140?locale=en>.

⁸⁶ Jason Farago, “MoMA Takes a Stand: Art from Banned Countries Comes Center Stage,” *The New York Times*, February 3, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/03/arts/design/moma-president-trump-travel-ban-art.html?_r=0.

Part II: *All of Us or None* at The Oakland Museum of California

This second case study spotlights an institution with an interest broader than just art. The Oakland Museum of California presents viewers with an interdisciplinary narrative focused on its geographical location: the state of California. The exhibition *All of Us or None: Social Justice Posters of the San Francisco Bay Area*, which ran from March 31 to August 19, 2012, demonstrates this intricate narrative at work. Much like *Committed to Print*, this exhibition displayed a collection of political prints in what the museum described as “the first comprehensive exhibition exploring the poster renaissance that started in the mid-1960s as a legitimate art form as well as a powerful tool for public debate on social justice issues.”⁸⁷ The narrative of this institution presents a context in which these prints are presented as culturally significant artifacts to the history and art of California.

All of Us or None featured a guest curator in Lincoln Cushing, an author, archivist, and consultant for the OMCA poster collection. Cushing described the purpose of the exhibition as a sampling of the vast collective work of social art that documented the history of progressive activism from roughly 1965 to the present.⁸⁸ Additionally, the exhibition paid homage to the collection’s original owner, Michael Rossman, one of the activists and leaders of the 1960s Free Speech Movement at Berkeley. After Rossman’s

⁸⁷ “All of Us or None: Social Justice Posters of the San Francisco Bay Area,” *Oakland Museum of California*, accessed June 15, 2017, <http://museumca.org/exhibit/all-us-or-none-social-justice-posters-san-francisco-bay-area>.

⁸⁸ Cushing, *All of Us or None: Social Justice Posters of the San Francisco Bay*, vii. The title of the exhibition, which is also the title of the collection, was inspired by a poem of the same name by German poet Bertolt Brecht. The poem is said to evoke the same democratic spirit of the movement represented by these posters.

death in 2008, his family donated his poster collection to OMCA and the care of Cushing, thus giving birth to OMCA's *All of Us or None* poster collection that produced this exhibition.⁸⁹

As guest curator, Cushing brought his own personal history of working with political prints and posters to *All of Us or None*. An archivist who previously held positions at UC Berkeley's Bancroft Library and Institute for Research on Labor and Employment (née Institute of Industrial Relations), Cushing utilizes his career to specialize in the history and preservation of political graphics from all over the world. This includes both government and oppositional prints from countries like the United States, Cuba, and China, with a strong focus on the latter half of the twentieth century.⁹⁰ Because of Cushing's outsider status, one understands *All of Us or None* as an exhibition produced not by a regular OMCA curator who completed this project and moved on to the museum's next exhibition, but by a scholar with an actual dedication to studying the history of political printmaking.

OMCA exhibited sixty-eight posters out of the roughly 24,000 distinct titles that the museum possessed in its collection as of that year.⁹¹ The collection shows a rather strong concentration of local posters, with about three quarters of them coming from the San

⁸⁹ Lincoln Cushing, "All of Us or None: Political Poster Archive Assembled by Michael Rossman," *docspopuli.org*, November 10, 2013, <http://www.docspopuli.org/articles/AOUON.html>.

⁹⁰ Lincoln Cushing, "Personal," *docspopuli.org*, accessed January 15, 2017, <http://www.docspopuli.org/Personal.html>. Some of his other publications include *Revolucion!: Cuban Poster Art* (2003), *Chinese Posters: Art from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution* (2007), and *Agitate! Educate! Organize! – American Labor Posters* (2009).

⁹¹ Cushing, *All of Us or None: Social Justice Posters of the San Francisco Bay Area*, viii. The number has since gone up to about 24,500.

Francisco Bay Area and the rest from outside California and the United States.⁹² The exhibition made no attempt to organize the posters by theme like in *Committed to Print*, likely due to the greater coverage of themes (in addition to those also featured at MOMA) such as LGBT rights, the environmental movement, and international causes.⁹³ The works took up a 3,700 square foot exhibit space, which included a real screenprinting studio positioned in the center. In addition to framing the actual posters for display along the gallery walls, *All of Us or None* featured multiple digital collages of the posters inside and at the entrance of the space made from high resolution scans to mimic the way that they originally looked when hung in the streets (fig. 9).⁹⁴

Fig. 9: Lobby entrance view of *All of Us or None*, 2012. Design by Dave Gottwald. Photograph by Dave Gottwald, dgottwald.org. Reproduced with permission.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., 51-84.

⁹⁴ Dave Gottwald, "All of Us or None: Social Justice Posters of the San Francisco Bay Area," *Document | Selected Design Works of Dave Gottwald*, accessed June 15, 2017, <http://www.dgottwald.org/all-of-us-or-none/>.

One finds that *Committed to Print* and *All of Us or None* share the same overall premise, at least on the surface. Both examine the history of progressive political printmaking from the 1960s to their respective presents (1980s for MOMA and 2010s for OMCA). Both even indicate a desire to present these objects “as a legitimate art form,” again, a response to the (still) common view that political prints fail to quite meet the definition of art. The level to which each institution goes to accomplish these same goals differs, however, as a result of the forces at play within each respective institutional narrative.

The most glaring deviation that OMCA makes from the precedent set in *Committed to Print* for exhibiting political prints is the immediate focus placed on works from the Bay Area. Cushing acknowledges the importance of this location as an epicenter for radical activity, most notably the Free Speech Movement that operated around UC Berkeley.⁹⁵ The dominance of Bay Area posters in this exhibition and collection cement this focus, and are a direct result of 1) the origins of the collection, which started even before it entered the walls of OMCA, and 2) the exhibition taking place in a museum “of California,” in other words, the institution’s narrative taking influence once again. While both the collection and museum emerged along similar timelines, OMCA’s beginnings, along with its intentions, go back even farther in the history of the state of California.

Three Museums, One Culture

Before the institution now known as the Oakland Museum of California came to fruition, there existed the Oakland Public Museum from 1907 to 1965. One of the major

⁹⁵ Cushing, *All of Us or None: Social Justice Posters of the San Francisco Bay Area*, 5.

figures involved in the early years of this museum was collector and scholar Charles P. Wilcomb, who also served as founding curator of the Golden Gate Park Museum (now the de Young) in San Francisco. Wilcomb combined his backgrounds as both an art historian of native New England's Colonial past and as an ethnographer of native California civilizations to develop a strong understanding of the importance that artifacts possess in the education of regional cultural history. As a curator, he established several of the teaching techniques now traditional to contemporary departments of education in American historical museums, such as ensuring the presence of reference materials in all exhibition spaces.⁹⁶ Wilcomb's efforts thus served an important part in the development of California's early museums.

Alongside the Oakland Public Museum, the Oakland Art Museum (née Gallery) served as precursor to the beginnings of OMCA. Founded in 1916 following the Panama Pacific International Exposition, the Oakland Art Museum assembled its own permanent collection despite the unrealistic odds of competing with the larger collections of the de Young and the Legion of Honor in San Francisco.⁹⁷ The gallery took advantage of the lack of interest shown by other San Francisco museums for early California art in order to build its collection around the artists of this region, a strategy proposed by future OMCA curator Paul Chadbourne Mills around mid century. Unfortunately, the perceived insignificance of California art at the time threatened to derail Mills's efforts, though he

⁹⁶ Thomas J. Schlereth, "PIONEERS OF MATERIAL CULTURE: Using American Things to Teach American History," *History News* 37, no. 9 (1982): 30.
<http://www.jstor.org.libaccess.sjlibrary.org/stable/42655367>.

⁹⁷ Paul Chadbourne Mills, "California Art at the Oakland Museum: Memories of the Beginnings," in *Plein Air Painters of California, The North*, ed. Ruth Lilly Westphal (Irvine, CA: Westphal Publisher, 1986), 24.

maintained the sentiment of Oakland as the potential setting for the story of California's history to finally unfold.⁹⁸

The final puzzle piece of OMCA's origins emphasized the state's ecological attributes. The Snow Museum of Natural History opened in 1922 to display the collection of Oakland explorer and hunter Henry Snow.⁹⁹ When the city began to design plans in the mid 1950s for a single museum emphasizing the history, art, and sciences of California, the Snow Museum combined with the Oakland Public Museum and Oakland Art Museum to make this goal possible. The new building for the Oakland Museum of California officially opened to the public in 1969, with Mills selected as curator of the art department.¹⁰⁰ Upon its opening, critic and art history professor Alfred Frankenstein wrote:

The art section is going to realign the whole history of art in the United States. All the books will have to be rewritten in accordance with it...Its collection has actually been assembled over a great many years, much of it among paintings which until recently were scorned and rejected. It suddenly makes California a major historic art center.¹⁰¹

Though a bit of an exaggeration, this statement certainly expresses OMCA's endeavor to bring greater attention to the art (as well as to the history and natural sciences) of California. Even going as far back to the work of Wilcomb, one sees a yearning on the part of scholars to spotlight the rich culture and environment being

⁹⁸ Ibid., 26-28.

⁹⁹ "About," *OMCA Collections*, accessed June 15, 2017, <http://collections.museumca.org/?q=about>.

¹⁰⁰ Peter H. Hassrick, "Western Art Museums: A Question of Style or Content," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 42, no. 3 (1992): 34.

<http://www.jstor.org.libaccess.sjlibrary.org/stable/4519497>.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 34-35.

cultivated in this region. This overarching California narrative dictates the curatorial practices utilized by the museum for each of the areas it covers. OMCA's split concentration on art, history, and natural sciences that ensued from its three antecedents also indirectly affects the viewer's understanding of the art and the museum as an institution. While MOMA's dedication to art, and to being a leading institution of art, makes its ties to the art world almost inescapable (and potentially consequential to its display strategies), OMCA's California narrative evades being tied down in such a way. Therefore, even with the looming uncertainty of defining the posters as art, the *All of Us or None* collection evaded facing that particular challenge when entering and subsequently holding an exhibition inside of OMCA.

Still, the exhibition reveals plenty about the way Cushing and the museum perceived these objects. The collection houses a large variety of different kinds of prints. With about 24,000 titles to choose from and only a possible sixty-eight to place on display, Cushing selected a total of 250 images to feature in the show's catalog.¹⁰² Ultimately, the exhibition drew from two types above all others: lithographs and silkscreens, the latter of which made up the largest portion. The number of formats, on the other hand, remained limited to just one: posters.

Cushing notes an important distinction in regards to what the museum called the objects placed on display. Whereas MOMA utilized the term "prints," OMCA opted for "posters" or "political posters." More accurately, Cushing favors the term "social justice" over "political" to describe the works, which exclude those produced by government

¹⁰² Steven Heller, "Up Against the Gallery Wall," *Printmag.com*, March 8, 2012, <http://www.printmag.com/imprint/up-against-the-wall-2-2/>.

agencies and large corporations. He defines “posters” as being 11 x 17 inches or larger, produced on paper in multiples, and intended for display on walls. He differentiates posters from “prints,” which he describes as more private and artistically oriented, as well as from “flyers,” which he describes as smaller and meant for being handed out to the public.¹⁰³

These parameters come across comparatively more exclusive than those utilized in *Committed to Print*, thus attesting to the varying levels of esteem given to different forms of print media by different perspectives. The exclusion of objects considered “prints” preserves the democratic, grassroots connotations embedded in the legacies of the social movements they represent. The differentiation from “flyers,” on the other hand, elevates them from mere communication tools to works of art in their own right. “Posters,” as OMCA presents them, thus fall somewhere between these two extremes.

Nevertheless, the museum credits Rossman as the original mastermind behind *All of Us or None*. Rossman began amassing his collection in 1977 for the purpose of using these posters as tools for educating others about the social activism of the 1960s. As former OMCA cataloguer Michael S. Bell notes, Rossman’s efforts to find these works reflect not that of regular collectors looking for art deemed valuable by dealers, but the “labor of love by a poor hippie” wanting to gather and document objects that no one else really saw the value in at the time.¹⁰⁴ His perspective as an activist of that era obviously provided him a greater respect for what these objects represented, leading him to preserve as many as possible.

¹⁰³ Cushing, *All of Us or None: Social Justice Posters of the San Francisco Bay Area*, viii.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, vii.

His spirit fueled the realization of the *All of Us or None* exhibition as well. OMCA labeled the works of this show as “posters” to maintain the less formal and more passionate attitude that they perceived in Rossman’s original collecting efforts. Rossman the activist wished to gather these objects to educate the public about the history and politics of the radical 1960s and beyond. As the new keepers of his collection, Cushing and OMCA give consideration to Rossman’s intentions, and thus based part of their organizational decisions for the exhibition on what he would have wanted.

Amongst the most important ideals adopted from Rossman by OMCA for this exhibition is his description of the “American Political Poster Renaissance.” The activist utilized this term to define the swell of political poster art production in America that began in the mid 1960s.¹⁰⁵ He viewed this renaissance as both a distinct body of art and a social phenomenon that arose with the radical political activity of this decade. The lack of attention that this work received from academic circles seemed to fuel his desire to collect posters by any means necessary.¹⁰⁶ Rossman’s collection intended to elucidate what he viewed as an important, yet ignored art historical period, and the *All of Us or None* exhibition directly inherits this mission along with the actual posters.

Rossman’s years of finding and collecting posters in the Bay Area yielded a collection comprised mainly of works by real people with strong ties to California. These included graphics created by Bay Area artists, designers, and activists like Lewis Suzuki, one of the first individuals to produce posters for the anti-war movement, Frank Cieciora, who created the iconic woodcut image of a clenched fist thrusting upwards in

¹⁰⁵ Rossman.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. According to Cushing, Rossman would go as far as to pull found posters from dumpsters.

protest,¹⁰⁷ and Wayne “Wally” Zampa, who combined the clenched fist with the peace symbol in a graphic chosen as the “national strike symbol” by several student groups at a conference held at San José State College.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, the exhibition highlights the importance of regional groups producing these kinds of posters, such as the La Raza Graphics collective (Fig 2), the students in the College of Environmental Design at UC Berkeley, and even artists working in relation to political performance groups like The Diggers and the San Francisco Mime Troupe.¹⁰⁹

As a result of Rossman’s (and later, the museum’s) collecting habits, *All of Us or None* projects a more interconnected collection of poster makers than that of *Committed to Print*. While the latter show drew criticism for including individuals for their name value as opposed to their strong involvement in political printmaking, the OMCA exhibition presented a collection of people united by the politics specific to their community. It painted a picture of the amount of activism occurring for different causes all in California. Cushing summarizes the California presence of all these individuals and causes within the catalog.

Anonymous works also shine through. In comparison, MOMA’s inclination to include only works with an identifiable name led to a misrepresentation of the people involved in this kind of work, as well as the democratic nature of it. *All of Us or None* featured a mix of posters from all over the spectrum, meaning viewers experienced works

¹⁰⁷ Cushing, *All of Us or None: Social Justice Posters of the San Francisco Bay Area*, 7-9.

¹⁰⁸ Lincoln Cushing and Wally Zampa, “Origins of the Clenched Fist-Peace Symbol Combination Graphic,” *docspopuli.org*, accessed January 15, 2017, <http://www.docspopuli.org/articles/Fist-Peace.html>.

¹⁰⁹ Cushing, *All of Us or None: Social Justice Posters of the San Francisco Bay Area*, 42-43.

by people they were familiar with, such as the previously mentioned *Untitled (On the Bones of the Oppressors)* (1969) by Emory Douglas (Fig 1); they experienced works with no known makers, such as *Speak Out Against the War* (1970); and they even experienced works by individuals they were likely to have never heard of, such as a lithograph titled *Gay Student's Union Presents: St. Valentine's Revolutionary Emacipation [sic]* (1971) credited to the name "Brougham."

The lack of importance that name value possesses to this kind of art becomes especially evident when observing two works of the same subject matter. For example, *The Politics of Vision* (1972), by Berkeley artist and environmental activist Ariel Parkinson, emanates the same attitude of California environmentalism one sees in a work like *Will You Please Stop Raping Our Planet!!!* (c. 1990), which possesses no known maker.¹¹⁰ Rather than focusing more on the people they displayed, Cushing and OMCA instead looked at the California-related politics in the works first. This created a more accurate picture of the regional history of California and its politics for viewers to piece together.

OMCA's narrative, of course, aims for just that. The legacy of the Oakland Art Museum's early attempts to build a collection of California art lives on through OMCA's current endeavors. The earlier museum began this aspect of the current museum's narrative by assembling the works and collections of early California artists like William Keith and Arthur Mathews.¹¹¹ *All of Us or None* added its own chapter to the story, bringing light to the political posters created by Californians involved in the radical

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 85-88.

¹¹¹ Mills, 28.

political activity concentrated around the Bay Area during the 1960s. Cushing extends this particular chapter into the present as well, noting the continued production of political posters by a new generation of Bay Area printmakers like Favianna Rodriguez, Art Hazelwood, and the Design Active Collective.¹¹² Maintaining the California narrative ultimately dictates OMCA's handling of its art collection and exhibitions.

As stated earlier, the number of different issues featured in this exhibition made a thematic organizational strategy less ideal. Instead, the original posters appeared all around the exhibition space, with the issues scattered all over as well. Just like at MOMA, the posters face the struggle of any one message standing out while surrounded by so many others calling for the viewer's attention. But while Wye and MOMA made some attempt to categorize their works by theme, at the very least drawing a little attention to each issue, Cushing and OMCA created a far more chaotic placement for the political issues in this exhibition.

Looking at the additional visuals that Cushing and OMCA incorporated, one realizes this chaos was actually created with a purpose. Though they displayed the original posters from the collection in safe, traditional frames, Cushing and OMCA seemed to want to also show viewers how these objects originally looked when first placed on display by their creators. The digital collages accomplished just that, mirroring the seemingly arbitrary placement of the originals throughout, and even spilling out of, the gallery space. As creative lead and exhibit designer Dave Gottwald described it, the

¹¹² Cushing, *All of Us or None: Social Justice Posters of the San Francisco Bay Area*, 105.

bricked walls of the gallery lobby acted like an “urban canvas” for which to overrun with the digital facsimiles for a chaotic yet organic look (fig. 10).¹¹³

Fig. 10: Installation view of digital collages and framed originals in *All of Us or None*. Photograph by Dave Gottwald, dgottwald.org. Reproduced with permission.

OMCA aimed to present the posters how they originally looked when posted “in the wild,” resulting in the museum taking liberties with the organization and creating a big, yet intended, cacophony of political views radiating from the many different works on display.¹¹⁴ Though the museum now preserves the originals, as indicated by the protective frames, this exhibition conveyed the immediacy that their makers created them with. Their makers cared little for keeping the posters perfectly displayed and in good condition as long as they communicated the urgency of their political matters. *All of Us or None* thus conveys the historical conditions of these objects prior to their entrance into this institutional collection.

The screenprinting studio further provides a glimpse into the history of the posters (fig. 11). Cushing and OMCA transformed the center of the exhibition space to illustrate for viewers the kind of setting in which activists produced these posters (keeping in mind

¹¹³ Gottwald.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

that silkscreens were the most abundant posters on display, as well as the most common and easily produced). The studio even included instructional panels, with a glossary of relevant terms, hung within beams and frames that surrounded the studio to suggest posters being hung out to dry (fig. 12).¹¹⁵ Again, the intention here lies in educating the viewers of the political poster renaissance through historically accurate visuals that include both the end product of the posters and the production process that went into them.

Fig. 11: Installation view of the screenprinting studio inside the gallery space of *All of Us or None*. Photograph by Dave Gottwald, dgottwald.org. Reproduced with permission.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

Fig. 12: Instructional panels hung outside the printing studio. Photograph by Dave Gottwald, dgottwald.org. Reproduced with permission.

Two Exhibitions, One Culture

Why place so much importance on history though? The answer ties back to the interdisciplinary narrative created by the different departments in OMCA. When the museum organized *All of Us or None* in 2012, it intended this exhibition to serve as a companion show to another major exhibition going on in the history department titled *The 1968 Exhibit*. During the summer of that year, OMCA ran both exhibitions concurrently, and ultimately extended the latter show through to the end of November due to popular demand.¹¹⁶ This multimedia exhibition aimed to explore “the social, political, and economic events of the year [1968],” including the escalation of the Vietnam War, the riots at the Democratic National Convention, and the many other (sometimes violent) uprisings and demonstrations by underrepresented groups.¹¹⁷ In addition to the *All of Us or None* posters, which made up the art department’s

¹¹⁶ “The 1968 Exhibit,” *Oakland Museum of California*, accessed June 15, 2017, <http://museumca.org/exhibit/1968-exhibit>.

¹¹⁷ “Oakland Museum of California Presents a Major Exhibition on a Monumental Year in the San Francisco Bay Area’s History,” *Oakland Museum of California*, accessed June 15, 2017, http://museumca.org/files/uploads/1968_Press_Release.pdf.

contribution, *The 1968 Exhibit* covered a 7,000-square-foot space with artifacts and interactive media that educated the public on the events of this tumultuous year.¹¹⁸

Ultimately, the two exhibitions worked together to educate viewers about the radical political thinking that emerged in the 1960s. Anyone who entered *The 1968 Exhibit* with an interest in the historical events of this era could then visit *All of Us or None* to view the artistic responses that people made about said events. Conversely, anyone visiting *All of Us or None* could then go to *The 1968 Exhibit* to better understand the historical background that informed the posters. Neither exhibition stood independently from the other, meaning history and art transcended over the objects on display. The *All of Us or None* posters became more than *just* what their “art department” heading defined them as.

Since OMCA divides its attention between art, history, and science as they relate to the state of California, the posters enter this narrative as not *just* objects of art, but as objects of California culture. Overall, the museum aims to collect and display objects, including art, in order to tell the story of California and its inhabitants.¹¹⁹ Its narrative asks viewers to consider the posters in terms of all the aspects that shape this story, including the art, history, science, and additionally, the politics.

Whereas MOMA’s art-driven narrative necessarily displayed the works in *Committed to Print* as mainly objects of art, OMCA’s interdisciplinary narrative allows for interpreting the works in *All of Us or None* as objects of politics as well. The museum’s

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Tom Frye and Nancy Kolb, “Special Report: 20th Century Collecting: Guidelines and Case Studies,” *History News* 46, no. 1 (1991): 9. <http://www.jstor.org.libaccess.sjlibrary.org/stable/42655949>. Strong emphasis is placed on the history and people of the twentieth century, second only in accessibility to those of the twenty-first century.

history of exhibitions includes topics such as the history of the Black Panthers, the effects of gentrification, and the legalization of marijuana. These often transcended the three departments similar to what one experienced with *All of Us or None* and *The 1968 Exhibit*.¹²⁰ OMCA does not shy away from political issues because of the importance that they possess to the story of California.

For example, the lithograph *International Women's Day March 8, 1981*, featured in *All of Us or None*, depicts a collage of women protesters behind black and white drawings of ethnically diverse women in order to advertise an upcoming rally by two political women's groups (fig. 13).¹²¹ Viewing it in an exhibition at OMCA, one primarily understands this to be an object intended to educate on one chapter of the story of California. This particular chapter happens to entail the pursuit for women's rights in the state as illustrated by the posters that publicized the major political gatherings for this cause. OMCA's narrative and interdisciplinary approach allow viewers to comprehend the different facets of the objects displayed, including the artistic and political facets of such a poster.

¹²⁰ In 2016 alone, OMCA held the following exhibitions on these particular topics, respectively: *All Power to the People: Black Panthers at 50*; *Oakland, I Want You to Know...*; and *Altered State: Marijuana in California*. This last exhibition incorporated political posters, historical documents and scientific displays all about the marijuana issue.

¹²¹ These groups were the Women's Committee to Celebrate International Women's Day and the Alliance Against Women's Oppression.

Fig. 13: *International Women's Day March 8, 1981*. 1981. Offset. From the *All of Us or None* archive of the Oakland Museum of California, <http://collections.museumca.org/?q=category/2011-schema/history/political-posters>.

By preserving the *All of Us or None* poster collection and holding the exhibition, OMCA declared the importance of these objects to the story of California and its art, which the museum has been cultivating longer than just about anyone else. Though OMCA fails to reach the level of influence in the world that MOMA possesses as an art institution, it still holds significance within its own sphere of California museums. Going back to the days of its three antecedents, it pioneered the notion of developing a major California collection, especially in the realm of art. Today, it boasts one of the largest collections of California art, including a sizable collection of political posters. Though unable to make the kind of statement that MOMA can, in regards to the importance of political posters to the history of art in general, OMCA still holds power to dictate the way the public understands these works.

Final Thoughts

All of Us or None and *Committed to Print* both succeeded in bringing attention to political prints and posters, with the former keeping the focus on the local production history. Both exhibitions also presented a general sample of the kinds of political issues that these works addressed, which again, raises the concern over whether or not the issues become “blurred,” as Les Levine put it. Cushing and OMCA attempted to include as many issues as possible with the intent of displaying the full scope of California political activity since the 1960s. Thus, the institution’s narrative came into play here. Narrative also helped determine the decision to display works by individuals, whether known or unknown, which accurately represented political printmaking in California in the second half of the twentieth century. In this sense, the *All of Us or None* exhibition aimed for a more accurate representation of this kind of art and its history.

Also adding to this, Cushing and OMCA strongly emphasized the role that Rossman had in this exhibition as the original collector. Looking at Rossman’s own writings, one sees the influence that the activist had on the development of *All of Us or None* (i.e.: adopting his concept of the Political Poster Renaissance). Incorporating the perspective of an activist and collector of political posters adds a sense of legitimacy to the exhibition, that it is not just the secondhand work of a museum and its curators, and not just the institutional narrative dictating the presentation of these objects. Rossman actually lived the era of which the works represent and, therefore, knew their true power as objects of art and politics. This kind of perspective and personal experience with a specific topic becomes invaluable for an institution intending to educate the public on it.

The multifaceted nature of political prints and posters lent itself to the interdisciplinary nature of OMCA. The museum interprets the objects it places on display from multiple angles, meaning the posters in this exhibition were presented as more than just art or just historical politics. This also allows for more creative display strategies. When OMCA underwent its 2009 renovation project, the museum expressed a goal to “create a more dynamic exhibition environment, achieve greater integration of its collections, and present the multilayered story of California and its people from a variety of perspectives...”¹²² The decision to run *All of Us or None* concurrently with *The 1968 Exhibit* illustrated this desired dynamism and integration. The digital collages likewise proved a creative means of displaying the posters in both their preserved and original states.¹²³

However, going back to the matter of organizing a general exhibition of political prints, OMCA actually possessed more leeway than MOMA to focus on just one issue. For *Committed to Print*, MOMA needed to justify the inclusion of political prints into its Modern art narrative, resulting in a general exhibition to introduce its audience to the artistic merits of these works. OMCA’s California narrative, on the other hand, could more easily incorporate an exhibition on say Black Panther Party posters because its audience could comprehend the relation of these works to California culture. That is not to say that *All of Us or None* as an introductory exhibition was completely unnecessary. But OMCA probably could have gotten away with holding an exhibition like *All Power*

¹²² “OMCA Transformation Fact Sheet,” *Oakland Museum of California*, accessed June 15, 2017, http://museumca.org/files/uploads/1_PRESS_Kit_Pack.pdf.

¹²³ The digital collages also proved a creative way of using the power of reproducibility inherent in the prints to display them to the public.

to the People: Black Panthers at 50 (2017) without raising any concern about its validity to its narrative.¹²⁴

One final aspect to consider about OMCA and its display of these kinds of objects is how the museum and its narrative relate to what the posters represent overall. OMCA opened its doors in 1969, right around the peak of the radical political activity of the decade.¹²⁵ When the museum opened, it represented the culmination of California finally receiving recognition for its historical and cultural importance. Reflecting on the museum's previous incarnations, Mills stated, "The Oakland Art Museum was an underdog...certainly California art history was, and Oakland itself was an underdog."¹²⁶ The narrative of OMCA parallels the narratives of the people of California who fought to spread awareness of social and political issues during the 1960s. The *All of Us or None* posters illustrate these stories, revealing the same underdog mentality of the museum where they now reside in. They make up one chapter of California's cultural history, which is finally championed by this museum in Oakland.

¹²⁴ "Oakland Museum of California Announces Details of Major Fall Exhibition *All Power to the People: Black Panthers at 50*," *Oakland Museum of California*, accessed June 15, 2017, http://museumca.org/sites/default/files/press_release/Programs%20Release_Black%20Panthers_REVISED%2010.4.16.pdf.

¹²⁵ *The 1968 Exhibit* tells us what OMCA considers the true peak of this activity.

¹²⁶ Mills, 26.

Part III: *Decade of Protest* at The Center for the Study of Political Graphics

The final institution in this study, the Center for the Study of Political Graphics in Culver City, California, offers an example of an archive as opposed to an actual museum. As the name suggests, CSPG remains dedicated solely to the display of political prints, meaning almost any of its exhibitions make for worthy examples to analyze for this topic. Among those organized during CSPG's early years of existence, *Decade of Protest: Political Posters from the United States, Viet Nam, & Cuba, 1965-1975* tackled only one political issue: the Vietnam War. Still, it was arguably the biggest issue from this era of radical galvanization. Compared to the other examples, this exhibition places political prints within a narrative concerned with the use of art as a vehicle for politics, resulting in a comparatively stronger attempt to emphasize the political aspects in them.

Resulting from the collaboration of multiple organizers, including CSPG founder Carol A. Wells, Smart Art Press Executive Vice-President Antonette DeVito, and editor-writer Susan Martin, *Decade of Protest* ran from January 19 to March 9, 1996 at the Smart Art Press owned Track 16 Gallery in Santa Monica, California. In describing this exhibition of Vietnam War prints, Martin said the following:

The exhibition provides a window onto an age of conflicting ideologies and social upheavals on a grand scale, utilizing the power of visual imagery to concretely render one of the defining events of that era: The Viet Nam War. Even in the most desperate situations, people express themselves in creative languages that both reveal and surpass the meanings of the conflict (and consensus) they were devised to reflect.”¹²⁷

¹²⁷ Susan Martin, “Introduction: The Left Turn,” in *Decade of Protest: Political Posters from the United States, Viet Nam, Cuba 1965-1975*, ed. Susan Martin (Santa Monica, CA: Smart Art Press, 1996), 11.

From this quote alone, one sees the political, historical, and artistic value projected by the people behind the exhibition onto the objects on display.

Wells and DeVito worked together to curate the more than 120 works in *Decade of Protest*. Wells brought her background as an art historian, archivist, and activist to the exhibition,¹²⁸ while DeVito represented both the gallery and publishing company that owned it, in particular Track 16 Gallery's owner Tom Patchett, whom provided the Vietnamese posters represented here.¹²⁹ With so many individuals and institutions involved, one immediately notes the potential for an amalgamation of many different perspectives, and therefore narratives, active in this one exhibition. Further evidence of this lies in the catalog edited by Martin, which features a collection of essays written by scholars that include Carlo McCormick, Nguyen Ngoc Dung, and David Kunzle.¹³⁰

While the exhibitions at MOMA and OMCA looked mainly at American political prints with only a few international ones included as well, *Decade of Protest* featured a fairly balanced display of works from three different countries: the United States, Vietnam, and Cuba.¹³¹ When organizing them within the gallery, the curators placed the posters into eleven sections, similar to the organization of *Committed to Print*. The titles of these sections were as follows: One War, Two Sides, Three Countries; Heroes and Anti-Heroes; National Icons; Casualties of War; Enlist or Resist; Demonstrations; Life

¹²⁸ Sharon Mizota, "Keeping the Message Alive," *Art on Paper* 14, no. 1 (2009): 49.
<http://www.jstor.org.libaccess.sjlibrary.org/stable/24556832>.

¹²⁹ Martin, "Introduction: The Left Turn," 11.

¹³⁰ Susan Martin, *Decade of Protest: Political Posters from the United States, Viet Nam, Cuba 1965-1975* (Santa Monica, CA: Smart Art Press, 1996), 11.

¹³¹ Carol A. Wells, "Viet Nam," in *Decade of Protest: Political Posters from the United States, Viet Nam, Cuba 1965-1975*, ed. Susan Martin (Santa Monica, CA: Smart Art Press, 1996), 15.

During Wartime; The War at Home; Victory to Viet Nam; Peace Efforts; and The War is Over.¹³² The ten-year time span of 1965-1975 coincided with the U.S. military's deployment into and withdrawal from Vietnam.¹³³

The decision to tackle this particular subject matter stems not only from the sizable body of work available, but also from a view of the Vietnam War as the central conflict for all the activism of the 1960s and 1970s. Tying resistance to the war with the same sentiments that fueled other radical youth, hippie, music, labor, feminist, and political movements, this exhibition aimed to frame “an age of idealism and rage” that was the 1960s and 1970s through the political graphics that circulated not only in America, but in international communities as well.¹³⁴ Dedication to this one issue replaces the goal featured in MOMA and OMCA's exhibitions of incorporating political printmaking into the institutional narrative. Instead, an understanding of the value of political prints already exists as an inherent aspect of CSPG, its narrative, and its longer ongoing history of displaying these kinds of works.

A Refuge for Resistance

Today, CSPG operates as a nonprofit organization housing “more than 90,000 protest graphics” that go as far back as the nineteenth century.¹³⁵ Its story begins similarly to that of the *All of Us or None* collection: with the work of an activist with an admiration for

¹³² Martin, *Decade of Protest*, 98.

¹³³ Carlo McCormick, “Make Posters Not War - Art as Artifact of the Viet Nam Era,” in *Decade of Protest: Political Posters from the United States, Viet Nam, Cuba 1965-1975*, ed. Susan Martin (Santa Monica, CA: Smart Art Press, 1996), 28.

¹³⁴ Martin, “Introduction: The Left Turn,” 13.

¹³⁵ “Who We Are,” *Center for the Study of Political Graphics*, accessed June 2, 2017, <http://www.politicalgraphics.org/>.

art. Prior to opening CSPG, Wells participated in a number of activist movements, including campaigns in support of the Civil Rights Movement, the anti-Vietnam War Movement, and the Nicaraguan Revolution. This last conflict led to her visiting the country in 1981 and witnessing in person the use of political graphics in the wake of social and political struggle by the Sandinista National Liberation Front.¹³⁶ Already possessing a background in art history, Wells witnessed firsthand the use of art for spreading messages and galvanizing the public. Impressed by the power behind these graphics, she began collecting the Nicaraguan posters to bring back to the United States. She eventually organized a traveling exhibition intended to counter the anti-Sandinista propaganda of the Reagan administration at the time.¹³⁷

Throughout the 1980s, Wells continued to curate exhibitions for her growing collection of political prints. Her collection ultimately grew to the point of her needing to find a place to donate the works. Unfortunately, such a place proved difficult to find. Wells looked to donate her collection to an institution with the intention of continuing to exhibit the prints “within a peace, justice, and human rights context.”¹³⁸ Unsatisfied with her search for a worthy home for her collection, Wells took it upon herself to create one, founding the Center for the Study of Political Graphics in 1988.¹³⁹ Run by a small staff assisted by interns and volunteers, the organization now utilizes a relatively small budget for acquisitions that, though unable to compete with other larger archives, takes in

¹³⁶ Sharon Mizota, 49.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 50.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

anywhere from 2,000 to 4,000 donations a year.¹⁴⁰ By 1996, Wells and CSPG possessed the resources and connections to make *Decade of Protest* possible.

American prints made up the largest portion of the exhibition with a total of fifty-seven different titles, mostly offset and silkscreen prints.¹⁴¹ The Vietnamese posters, all of which as mentioned came from the collection of Patchett, made up thirty-nine works in the exhibition and included printed silkscreens as well as hand painted works in pencil and tempera.¹⁴² Finally, Cuba provided the smallest sampling of prints with just twenty-nine. Like the American examples, these comprised of offset and silkscreen prints.¹⁴³

Throughout the catalog, the most common terms used by the contributors to define these works included “posters” and, to a lesser extent, “graphics.”¹⁴⁴ With regards to what makes it into the archive and what does not, Wells and CSPG rely on a set of standards that do not take into account any strict definitions of words like “posters” as in the OMCA case. The acquisition of works rest on two factors: 1) the works must be overtly political and 2) they must be produced as multiples. This first factor further stresses a focus on popular, grassroots politics that differentiate from government or corporate sponsored political messages that CSPG identifies with propaganda.¹⁴⁵ The works collected here thus align with the same autonomy seen in the works featured at MOMA and OMCA.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 47.

¹⁴¹ Martin, *Decade of Protest*, 99-101.

¹⁴² Ibid., 101-103.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 104-105.

¹⁴⁴ Not to mention the obvious fact that the term “political graphics” is right in the name of the institution.

¹⁴⁵ Mizota, 47.

Regarding the second factor, Wells states, “Anyone can make a handmade sign saying anything, but to take the next step of getting resources to reproduce and distribute a poster so that its message will be in many places—that has a more grass-roots organizing aspect.”¹⁴⁶ This union of the multiple with the political emphasizes the importance of the democratic availability of prints created to support popular movements, many of which required fighting against more established voices for exposure.

However, *Decade of Protest* featured a few outliers in the non-printed works from Vietnam. CSPG’s standards for collecting graphics apply to the works in its collection, but this exhibition combined that collection with the one owned by Track 16 Gallery’s Patchett.¹⁴⁷ His collection comprised of the original paintings from which posters were printed and then widely distributed.¹⁴⁸ Despite not being the actual multiples, the works in pencil and tempera are still exhibited alongside the other “posters,” thus showing more flexibility on the part of CSPG when it comes to these defining terms. A work like Nguyen Bich’s *Viet Nam’s Ultimate Triumph* (n.d.) (fig. 14), made in pencil, tempera, and gold leaf on paper, carries the same message featured in its printed copies, leading the curators to deem it suitable for inclusion in this exhibition. They also illustrate a bit of the process that goes into designing and producing such prints.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 47-48.

¹⁴⁷ At this point, it would make some sense to start discussing the origins of the posters and their collections, as was done in the first two sections of this study. However, the presence of multiple institutions and narratives becomes a major aspect to consider in this exhibition and the way CSPG operates, so this study will return to this point later on after discussing some other details about the exhibition.

¹⁴⁸ Wells, “Viet Nam,” 16.

Fig. 14: Nguyen Bich. *Viet Nam's Ultimate Triumph*. n.d. Pencil, tempera, and gold leaf on paper. From the Collection of Tom Patchett, Track 16, Smart Art Press.

The American posters featured the likes of well-known individuals like Emory Douglas and Malaquias Montoya, activist groups like the Students for a Democratic Society, and of course anonymous artists whose work survived thanks to collectors like CSPG and their contributors.¹⁴⁹ Of the Vietnamese posters, some of the more notable names included Huynh Van Thuan, Bui Huy Hieu, and Nguyen Bich, in addition to a few unnamed individuals.¹⁵⁰ The posters from Cuba arise mostly by way of Cuban Third World solidarity organizations like the Organization of Solidarity with the People of Africa, Asia and Latin America (OSPAAAL) and the international reaching magazines they produced like *Tricontinental*.¹⁵¹ No anonymous works appear from this country.

Despite Americans possessing a slightly greater presence in the exhibition than those from Vietnam and Cuba (understandably a result from the easy access that the organizers

¹⁴⁹ Martin, *Decade of Protest*, 99-101.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 101-103.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 104-105.

would have to such works), *Decade of Protest* provides a fairly equal representation of leftist perspectives from all three countries, indicating a desire on the part of the organizers to cover the domestic and international perspectives of the war equally. Overall, the perspectives in this exhibition seem to come from a diverse collection of sources, but looking at the three countries of origin individually reveals otherwise. With the Americans, Wells and CSPG provided a similar mixture of “stars,” collectives, activists, and unidentified real people to that of OMCA and the *All of Us or None* exhibition. But as it happens, almost every anonymous work featured comes from the United States, while nearly all those from Vietnam and Cuba identify the maker and/or organization that designed and/or printed them.¹⁵²

The reasoning for this lies in the different production histories between the three countries. American poster makers operated in opposition to their government, while those in Northern Vietnam actually possessed the support of theirs.¹⁵³ Political poster production in Vietnam began in the 1940s during the war against the French colonialists. Nationalism remained a key element of the works featured in *Decade of Protest*, with art makers supporting their country and vilifying the imperialist Americans.¹⁵⁴ Dai Dong’s *Whether (American Bombers) Fly High or Low, They Cannot Escape* (1972) silkscreen, for example, features a victorious soldier, with his comrades in the back, taking down American planes in the name of Vietnam (fig. 15).

¹⁵² Martin, *Decade of Protest*, 98-105.

¹⁵³ Wells, “Viet Nam,” 16.

¹⁵⁴ Nguyen Ngoc Dung, “Why Viet Nam Won the War,” in *Decade of Protest: Political Posters from the United States, Viet Nam, Cuba 1965-1975*, ed. Susan Martin (Santa Monica, CA: Smart Art Press, 1996), 51-53.

Fig. 15: Dai Dong. *Whether (American Bombers) Fly High or Low, They Cannot Escape*. 1972. Silk screen. From the Collection of Tom Patchett, Track 16, Smart Art Press.

One notes the irony of the exhibition organizers including these works. CSPG's narrative supports political graphics created for oppositional grassroots purposes. Yet Vietnamese posters like Dong's obviously stand with their government and portray war as a necessary and glorious solution to their imperialist plight. While oppositional in the sense that the American imperialists serve as the dominant oppressors, the Vietnamese works fail to qualify as grassroots and thus contradicted the intention of the institution. Again, the Vietnamese works belonged to Patchett and not the CSPG collection, but exhibiting them still raises concern about the narrative of the latter, which denounces so-called government propaganda.

The Cuban posters likewise paint the Americans as evil and the Vietnamese as heroes. They also possessed a history of government support, though their situation differed in that they represented the successful revolutionary uprising of a new communist regime (revolutionary but now in control).¹⁵⁵ For this reason, Cuban political printmaking in the 1960s and 1970s flourished under groups like OSPAAAL who looked to not only serve as a model of a successful uprising, but also lend support to colonized countries through posters of solidarity, as in the aptly named *Solidaridad* (1972) offset by Olivio Martinez.¹⁵⁶ Both the Vietnamese and Cuban works presented different situations from the US in regards to who created these posters and how they were disseminated. The samples featured in *Decade of Protest* reflect these situations but spark debate over their inclusion in a CSPG exhibition.

All together, the posters share a liberal perspective associated with the New Left of the 1960s and 1970s. Regardless of the makers and their governments, the invasion by outsiders is presented as immoral while support and solidarity are extended to the people in Vietnam. The “age of idealism and rage” that *Decade of Protest* attempts to frame refers to the liberal New Left that formed during this time in the Western world while supporting the advancement of communism in places like Asia and Latin America. The posters in this exhibition piece together a visual history of the ideas of the New Left, thus keeping said ideas alive in the minds of viewers.

¹⁵⁵ David Kunzle, “Cuba’s Art of Solidarity,” in *Decade of Protest: Political Posters from the United States, Viet Nam, Cuba 1965-1975*, ed. Susan Martin (Santa Monica, CA: Smart Art Press, 1996), 72.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

Making the Vietnam War the central theme of the exhibition shows a level of understanding not seen in the previous examples. As noted, *Committed to Print* at MOMA and *All of Us or None* at OMCA centered on political prints of the 1960s in general, resulting in a plethora of different issues competing for attention. The clear focus on just one issue presented in *Decade of Protest* eliminates such a problem altogether. Instead, viewers experienced the multifaceted reality of the war as illustrated by the posters, giving them a more intricate and thus more illuminating look at this one theme.

Take, for example, the 1967 silkscreen *Resist! October 16* by the Vietnam Day Committee. Despite depicting nothing more than a handprint and the title in large typeface, viewers gain a clear understanding of how this anti-war poster relates to every other poster featured in this exhibition. Compared to *All of Us or None*, viewers might struggle to see a connection between Suzuki's *No More Hiroshimas: No More War* and Parkinson's *The Politics of Vision* that goes deeper than just their both being political prints. CSPG's commitment to single-issue exhibitions allowed for this kind of viewing experience.

The eleven sections that divided the posters in the exhibition captured the different aspects of this single issue, without grouping them by country of origin. One notes from these titles an attempt on the part of CSPG and the gallery to really break down the different aspects of war as depicted by the posters. The exhibition aimed to present as many (left-leaning) vantage points of the war as possible to viewers, from the individuals on the battlefield, to the protestors against the war, and even to life at the end of the conflict.

The section titled “National Icons,” for example, focused specifically on the way the creators of the posters utilized major public figures to communicate their opinions on the war. By choosing against dividing the posters by their respective countries, Wells and CSPG juxtapose how such figures appear in the works of different people from around the world. The Vietnamese portray Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese soldiers as heroic individuals, such as in *Cooperation in Battle, Shoot Down Many Enemy Aircraft in Order to Launch the Offensive* (1972) by H. Hoan (fig. 16), while the Americans depict American soldiers as victims, and leaders like Richard Nixon as untrustworthy swindlers, as in *Would You Buy a Used War from this Man?* (1969) by the Student Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam (fig. 17).¹⁵⁷ Such an organizational strategy clarifies the differences between the works that one might miss if the exhibition tackled multiple issues at once.

Fig. 16: H. Hoan. *Cooperation in Battle. Shoot Down Many Enemy Aircraft in Order to Launch the Offensive*. 1972. Silkscreen. From the Collection of Tom Patchett, Track 16, Smart Art Press.

¹⁵⁷ Wells, “Viet Nam,” 21.

Fig. 17: Student Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam (Washington, DC). *Would You Buy a Used War from this Man?* 1969. Offset. From the All of Us or None archive of the Oakland Museum of California, <http://collections.museumca.org/?q=category/2011-schema/history/political-posters>.

More Perspectives

CSPG served as the primary institution responsible for *Decade of Protest*, so its narrative and the effects it had on the posters takes a primary importance as well. As an activist, Wells brought a personal devotion to the issues and movements behind the objects at CSPG. And as an art historian, she brought her knowledge as a scholar of the history of the visual arts as well. One can argue she founded CSPG with the best attributes brought by Wye to *Committed to Print* and Rossman to the original *All of Us or None* collection. Of course, CSPG's narrative obviously caters to political prints to a far greater extent than the narratives of either MOMA or OMCA. The archive champions the display and study of this kind of art, proclaiming a mission to advocate "the power of

political art to educate and inspire people to action.”¹⁵⁸ Such a statement signals an attempt at satisfying the dichotomous identity of political prints as both objects of art and objects of politics. CSPG periodically places its prints on display in art spaces like Track 16 Gallery, thus adhering to their identity as art, and at the same time maintains the position that these objects can be used to spur further political action, thus adhering to their identity as political objects.

Decade of Protest certainly covers both sides. The catalog identifies and interprets these aspects in the prints as it aims to “balance the social, political, and aesthetic concerns” represented in the exhibition.¹⁵⁹ Wells in particular provides a breakdown of the differences (political and aesthetic) between the posters of all three countries of origin, and further categorizes them based on their audiences, messages, and message-makers.¹⁶⁰ In acknowledging how their aesthetics range “from the raw and aggressive to the polished and sophisticated,” Wells also underlines the marginalization of the posters (at least in the West) as resulting from their damning critique of government policies and actions and *not* because of a lack of aesthetic value.¹⁶¹

A poster like Jay Belloli’s 1970 silkscreen *Amerika is Devouring its Children* (fig. 18), for example, illustrates the kind of troubled views such works attained as both a work of art and a political statement. Here, Belloli appropriates the figures in Francisco Goya’s *Saturn Devouring His Son* (1823) in conjunction with his message against the

¹⁵⁸ “Who We Are.”

¹⁵⁹ Martin, “Introduction: The New Left,” 12.

¹⁶⁰ Wells, “Viet Nam,” 17. Three specific categories are identified: anti-intervention, solidarity, and anti-imperialist posters.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

cannibalistic-like depletion of America's soldiers in the war. Hidden behind the condemnation of the war lies the artistic skill and reference utilized by Belloli to create such a powerful poster. Acting in compliance with CSPG's narrative, this exhibition demonstrates how posters like this one "must be viewed as potent graphic statements in their own right, not just because they are aesthetically engaging" works of art.¹⁶² Both aspects remain important to CSPG's narrative.

Fig. 18: Jay Belloli. *Amerika is Devouring its Children*. 1970. Silkscreen. From The Art of Protest Poster Collection of the San Jose State University Special Collections & Archives, <http://digitalcollections.sjlibrary.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/sjsupro/id/5>. Reproduced with permission.

Nevertheless, this exhibition represents more than just the views of the archive alone. CSPG's lack of its own gallery space creates a new variable not present in either MOMA's or OMCA's exhibitions to factor into its analysis. Though Wells and CSPG brought the majority of the works featured in *Decade of Protest*, this analysis also looks

¹⁶² Martin, "Introduction: The New Left," 12.

at Track 16 Gallery as the institution that served as the actual *physical* setting for the exhibition. The secondary institution becomes a dynamic variable that changes from one exhibition held by CSPG to another. While the main scrutiny still applies towards the primary institution, one must nevertheless ask the same questions about any secondary institutions, like Track 16 Gallery, involved as well.

Decade of Protest was among the earliest exhibitions held at Track 16 Gallery, which opened in 1994 as part of the ensemble of art galleries at Bergamot Station in Santa Monica, California.¹⁶³ Created in conjunction with Smart Art Press, Track 16 Gallery aimed to “expand the understanding of contemporary art and culture,” a mission still central to both the gallery and publishing press today.¹⁶⁴ In situating *Decade of Protest* among the gallery’s history of exhibitions, one finds a collection of shows dedicated to the culture, politics, and artistic experimentation that define the Contemporary period. From serious exhibitions about graphics calling for peace, to more humorous shows featuring paintings about the President Clinton-Lewinski scandal and subsequent impeachment, Track 16 Gallery demonstrates an affinity towards art reflective of past and recent culturally significant events.¹⁶⁵

An exhibition like *Decade of Protest*, with its focus on political graphics about the Vietnam War, ultimately conformed to the kind of image and narrative that the gallery

¹⁶³ The gallery has since moved to Los Angeles.

¹⁶⁴ “About Us/Contact Us,” *Smart Art Press*, accessed June 2, 2017, <https://www.smartartpress.com/pages/about-us>.

¹⁶⁵ “Exhibitions,” *Track 16*, accessed June 2, 2017, <http://www.track16.com/exhibitions.php>. Examples of these exhibitions include *Blood, Sweat, and Tears* in 1997, which featured local and international graphics of protest, and the *First Annual Post-Impeachment Group Show* in 1999, a satirical painting show on global politics at the turn of the millennium.

wished to establish. For one thing, Patchett himself provided the Vietnamese posters from his own collection to display in his own gallery, thereby asserting his position as collector to dictate the collection narrative. Furthermore, the exhibition's exploration into a highly political matter that engulfed 1960's American, Vietnamese, and Cuban cultures displayed the same boldness as that of later Track 16 Gallery exhibitions. Wells and CSPG chose to work with this gallery because, as a secondary institution, it possessed the attributes they felt they needed to display both the political and artistic value of these works.

Working with different venues allows Wells and CSPG to remain selective about where they display the works in their collection. At the same time, it allows them to explore different locations and determine the kinds of venues that best complement (or fail to complement) this kind of art. Some of these include galleries like Track 16, university museums like the Wignall Museum of Contemporary Art at Chaffey College, and art centers like the Watts Towers in Los Angeles.¹⁶⁶ In addition to loaning its exhibitions to single locations, the archive arranges travelling exhibitions to reach multiple venues such as schools, community centers, libraries, and other public learning centers.¹⁶⁷

Still, as a nonprofit archive without a venue of its own, CSPG remains incapable of really cultivating a strong institution for displaying political prints. It certainly makes for

¹⁶⁶ Examples: *No Human Being is Illegal: Posters on the Myths & Realities of the Immigrant Experience* at the Wignall Museum of Contemporary Art in 2016 and *We Shall Not Be Moved: Posters and the Fight Against Displacement in L.A.'s Figueroa Corridor* at the Watts Towers Art Center in 2002.

¹⁶⁷ Mizota, 48

a great place to house them, but without the same level of resources as that of MOMA or even OMCA, CSPG can only do so much. Exhibitions like *Decade of Protest* remain confined to smaller venues that then move on to other shows and may or may not want to play host to this kind of art again. This lack of stability reduces the weight of CSPG's efforts to raise public awareness of the history and meaning of political prints.

Final Thoughts

Though *Decade of Protest* never garnered the same amount of attention from the art world as *Committed to Print* or *All of Us or None*, it illustrates the kind of exhibition produced by an institution with a narrative of specializing in educating the public on political prints. Additionally, it illustrates how much more one learns about these prints when only one political theme takes center stage. For example, while both the "Governments and Leaders" section of *Committed to Print* and the "National Icons" section of *Decade of Protest* showcased the depiction of leaders by political printmakers, the latter show maintained the Vietnam War as the overarching issue intended to further contextualize the prints. CSPG possesses the resources and, more importantly, the mission to cover different themes in the exhibitions that it organizes. Like the *All of Us or None* collection, this mission results from a collector in Wells with a background and appreciation for this kind of art.

The added variable of the secondary institution acting as the venue for the exhibition raised the number of perspectives and narratives at play, however. In the case of Track 16 Gallery, the additional narrative suited the display of politically charged Contemporary artworks. This partnership also yielded the inclusion of Patchett's Vietnamese posters and

painting, resulting in a greater exploration of the topic in question and the people around the world involved in it. In this case, the exhibition grew stronger with the inclusion of the secondary institution (though at the expense of including government supported posters that CSPG otherwise rejected). Later exhibitions reveal CSPG's willingness to take such collaborations even further.

In 2002, for example, the archive partnered with the political group Strategic Actions for a Just Economy (SAJE) and the print studio Self-Help Graphics and Art (SHG) to produce a poster campaign and exhibition to counter the then ongoing displacement of people in Los Angeles's Figueroa Corridor. Titled *We Shall Not Be Moved: Posters and the Fight Against Displacement in L.A.'s Figueroa Corridor*, the exhibition saw CSPG go beyond simply displaying art; it intended to actually cause social change as well.¹⁶⁸ While this later exhibition warrants an analysis of its own, here it helps illustrate the evolution of CSPG's archives since the days of *Decade of Protest*.

Later developments also demonstrate the new strategies that Wells and CSPG adopted for getting these prints out there. Now in the twenty-first century, CSPG takes advantage of Internet connectivity to extend access to new and previous exhibitions to a worldwide audience like never before. A virtual catalog of *Decade of Protest*, including images and excerpt text, can be viewed on the website of the University of Virginia's

¹⁶⁸ Tomas Benitez, Gilda Haas, and Carol Wells, *We Shall Not Be Moved: Posters and the fight against displacement in L.A.'s Figueroa Corridor* (Los Angeles: Strategic Actions for a Just Economy, 2003), 1-4.

Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities.¹⁶⁹ This allows viewers unable to attend the physical exhibition a chance to browse these works from the convenience of any computer or mobile device with access to the Internet.

In considering these creative takes on traditional exhibition practices, some major conflicts arise that make one question their practicality and legitimacy. The travelling exhibitions threaten to deteriorate the delicate material of the prints as they move from one venue to another instead of being kept in safe storage. On the other hand, the digital exhibitions fail to offer any first-hand encounter with the art that one expects from an art displaying institution. Despite the seemingly opposite nature of these two conflicts, Wells and CSPG offer a single answer to both in the form of their own understanding of political prints. They view them as circulating public statements intended for exposure in spite of their physical ephemerality.¹⁷⁰ The political statements, not the physical prints themselves, carry the true value in this kind of art. Considering that the quality of reproducibility lies at the heart of printmaking, the act of creating digital reproductions of exhibitions can be understood as an extension of the messages as well. CSPG holds that the best way to keep political prints and their messages alive is to keep them in the public eye, which both the travelling and digital exhibitions accomplish.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ “The Sixties Project Presents: Decade of Protest,” *The Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities*, accessed June 2, 2017, http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Exhibits/Track16.html.

¹⁷⁰ Mizota, 48.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

Conclusion

The more interest that builds around political prints created since the 1960s, the more museums and galleries will push to exhibit them. The three examples in this study demonstrate how different institutions and their narratives create different contexts in which to view these prints. Furthermore, the different contexts changed the way that viewers at each institution understood these prints.

In Part I, MOMA's narrative created a context that argued for the artistic merit of these prints on an influential stage. The museum intended for this exhibition to introduce these prints into the story of Modern art, resulting in a rather general take on the history of political printmaking of this period. While the politics also obviously played a major part in this exhibition, MOMA's failure to accurately represent the kinds of people who created these prints risked a misrepresentation of this period of political printmaking. Again, at the heart of these prints are the real people who created them in response to being marginalized by oppressive forces, so for the museum itself to misrepresent them was ironic.

Part II then focused on a more recent print exhibition held at OMCA. The interdisciplinary narrative in this museum allowed viewers to consider these prints as interdisciplinary objects as well, with ties to both the art and politics of the history of California in the 1960s. Such a narrative managed to take into consideration the Californians who the prints represented, though with a few of the same missteps seen in

the MOMA example.¹⁷² That the efforts of an activist and collector of these prints served as the inspiration for the exhibition shows that OMCA cared about the real people behind the prints as well.

Finally, Part III shifted to an institution that actively sought to accommodate this kind of art. The exhibitions at CSPG have evolved over the years to work with and emphasize the properties of political prints, like their reproducibility, in the eyes of viewers. CSPG even goes beyond simply displaying these prints and actually transforms its exhibitions into activist projects in their own right. The politics in these prints are therefore very much alive in the eyes of CSPG, all while still presenting them in galleries and other such contexts where they are understood as art objects as well.

Further exploration into exhibitions that go the route of relational aesthetics seems to be the next step for a study like this one. As briefly touched upon earlier, CSPG's *We Shall Not Be Moved* makes for a future case study on how a political print exhibition can morph into something with even greater societal implications. As real people in the present continue to endure and fight back against many of the same or similar issues of the 1960s, 1970s, and so on, political art will also continue to serve as a constructive outlet for expressing feelings of oppression.¹⁷³ Political print exhibitions like those of CSPG possess the ability to bridge the past with the present. They can highlight the historical antecedents of present-day movements by exhibiting the radical prints of the

¹⁷² *All of Us or None* certainly focused on California political movements of the 1960s and beyond, but covered too many issues to not consider this a general exhibition on (California) political prints.

¹⁷³ This extends to the use of electronic graphics and social media as the next evolutionary stage for political prints in the twenty-first century.

past next to those created for causes currently being fought.¹⁷⁴ In this sense, the prints remain alive as objects of politics while displayed in spaces intended for objects of art.

Yet, one still finds that regardless of the circumstances of display in which institutions place them, the ability to convey both the artistic and political aspects of the works remains yet possible. This ultimately comes down to the potency of the prints themselves. The qualities that make these prints art help to amplify their political qualities by transforming a message into an eye-catching graphic. The same phenomenon applies vice versa. Works of art often become more powerful when created with political undertones. The power of political prints to behave as both shines through in the end. All three exhibitions in this study allow for an understanding that these objects are not ordinary works of art or political tools, but something different in their own right.

Ultimately, the most successful political print exhibitions emphasize the qualities of the prints in relation to the real people their messages represent. These prints came to exist as a result of the needs of the marginalized and the underrepresented. Exhibiting them in museums and galleries allows the people of today to understand their (sometimes ongoing) struggles. As art objects, they represent an important, yet rarely told chapter in the study of art history in which people turned to reproducible art as an aid in their fights for social justice. This is why political prints of the twentieth century deserve to be exhibited, and should thus be the most important aspect that the exhibitions convey about them.

¹⁷⁴ For *We Shall Not Be Moved*, CSPG exhibited older prints from its archive next to prints that were created specifically for this exhibition in response to the people being forced out of their homes of Los Angeles's Figueroa Corridor. All prints related to gentrification, thus making a stronger statement on the plight of these individuals in danger of losing their homes.

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