

Patriot Acts

Taking on climate change, a new book of posters demonstrates their continued vitality in the age of the Internet.

DMITRI SIEGEL & EDWARD MORRIS



This Metropolis Books release features 50 detachable posters. "We want you to destroy this book," write the book's editors, Dmitri Siegel and Edward Morris. "We hope you will tear out the pages and display them." Printed on 100 percent recycled paper, it was underwritten by a number of donors, including the Environmental Defense Fund.



by
**Michael
Bierut**

Graphic design, the field to which I've devoted my life, isn't mentioned often in popular fiction. A rare exception can be found in Richard Price's epic 600-page novel from 1992, *Clockers*. In it, Price tells the story of a young drug dealer, Strike, who relays his desperate day-to-day existence in harrowing detail. My profession makes its appearance while Strike is visiting his parole officer:

The walls of the waiting room were hung with black-and-white cautionary posters, encircling Strike with admonitions, the subjects ranging from AIDS to pregnancy to crack to alcohol, each one a little masterpiece of dread. Strike hated posters. If you were poor, posters followed you everywhere—health clinics, probation offices, housing offices, day care centers, welfare offices—and they were always blasting away at you with warnings to do this, don't do that, be like this, don't be like that, smarten up, control this, stop that.

That three-word sentence stopped me cold: "Strike hated posters." Graphic designers, as everybody knows, love posters. The difference between these two points of view couldn't be more disturbing to me. I love posters. I love looking at them, and I love designing them. By the time I'd read those words, I'd spent countless hours designing many of those "little masterpieces of dread." Bold. Black-and-white. Designed to, yes, blast away with their admonishing messages. I had to do some soul-searching. Who was I designing for anyway?

The poster for the pro bono cause is, frankly, a bit of a cliché in contemporary design practice. Like many others, I was always happy to take one on because of the meaty subject matter. Forget the struggle to find drama in inherently dull commercial subjects. Here instead were the great themes: life, death, good, evil, the very future of humanity. And my imaginary audience was, often, humanity itself. At least that's what I told myself. If I were completely honest, I'd have admitted that my real audience was one I knew a little bit better: my fellow designers. Or perhaps even a more cynically limited subset: fellow designers who judge design competitions.

Right around the time I first read Price's words, I was ready to make some changes. Design for designers is great, but the real challenge in doing cause-related work is communicating with the larger public, beyond our small circles. It's harder in every way: to compete with all the other noise, to reach the people who can really make a difference. This requires thinking differently, in five specific ways.

ONE: Be clear about your purpose.

If you're acting as a communicator, be clear about what you're communicating. "Building awareness" can be a cop-out, an excuse to separate cause and effect. What do you want your work to accomplish? How will you know if you're successful? Make your goal action, and determine the most direct way to provoke it. Be outrageously ruthless.

TWO: Know your audience.

Who are you trying to reach? Don't start until you have an answer to this question. A message that doesn't ring true—visually, verbally, and in every other way—will get dismissed or, even worse, ignored. Understand the context of the people who will be seeing your work. The more you can master that language, the more your message will get through.

THREE: Try not to use design as therapy.

When horrible things happen, feeling bad is an understandable reaction. Helping makes us feel better. Figure out the best way to help. Is making a poster the best way? Sometimes, donating your talent is great. Often, simply donating money is better.

FOUR: Don't be "creative."

The brilliant Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena says, "Creativity is what you do when there is not enough knowledge. If you have knowledge, you do not need creativity." Don't use work for social causes as a showcase for your cleverness, or as an excuse to stretch your creative muscles without the constraints of demanding clients. Do your research, get the knowledge you need, and then find the fastest, most bullshit-free route from point A to point B. If you can be clever on the way, go ahead—but not at the expense of getting your point across. Be your own demanding client.

FIVE: No matter what, be optimistic and positive.

The best designs and the most effective campaigns are inspiring, not depressing. Don't admonish. Don't talk down to people. At its best, our work can serve as a rallying cry and give voice to people who might otherwise feel isolated and silent. Use your work to visualize the future, and lead the way with enthusiasm and passion.

There are lots of ways to design for a cause. No doubt each of the designers represented here has grappled with issues similar to mine. The Green Patriot Poster project shows how they have responded to the challenge on their own terms. Together these posters demonstrate that design can be a potent tool for communication and social transformation. And if you look hard enough and think even harder, you, too, will find your own way. ▣

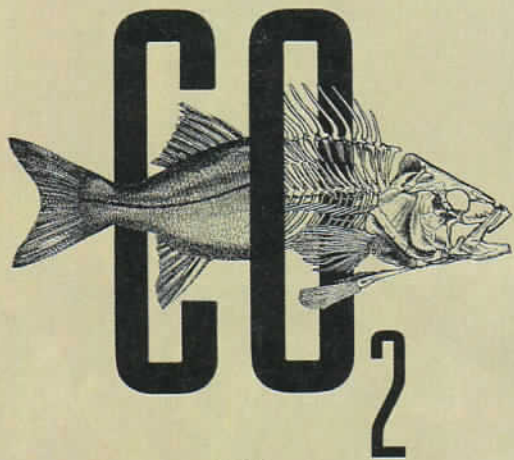


"Design for designers is great," Michael Bierut writes, "but the real challenge in doing cause-related work is communicating with the larger public, beyond our small circles."

THE YES MEN

Photo by Joseph Huff-Hannon
 The artists' collective of political provocateurs crashes the United Nations-sponsored climate-change negotiations in Copenhagen.

Posters courtesy the artists



One-third of
all animal species
are at risk of
extinction by 2050
unless greenhouse
gas emissions
are reduced by 50%

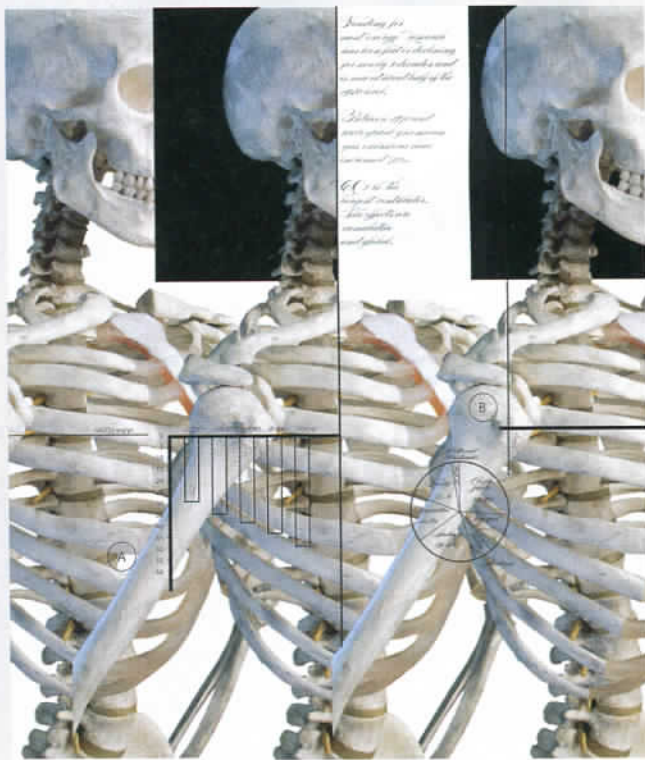
JOE SCORSONE &
ALICE DRUEDING
Consequences of CO₂



FRÉDÉRIC TACER
Global Warming



WILL ETLING
Sustain



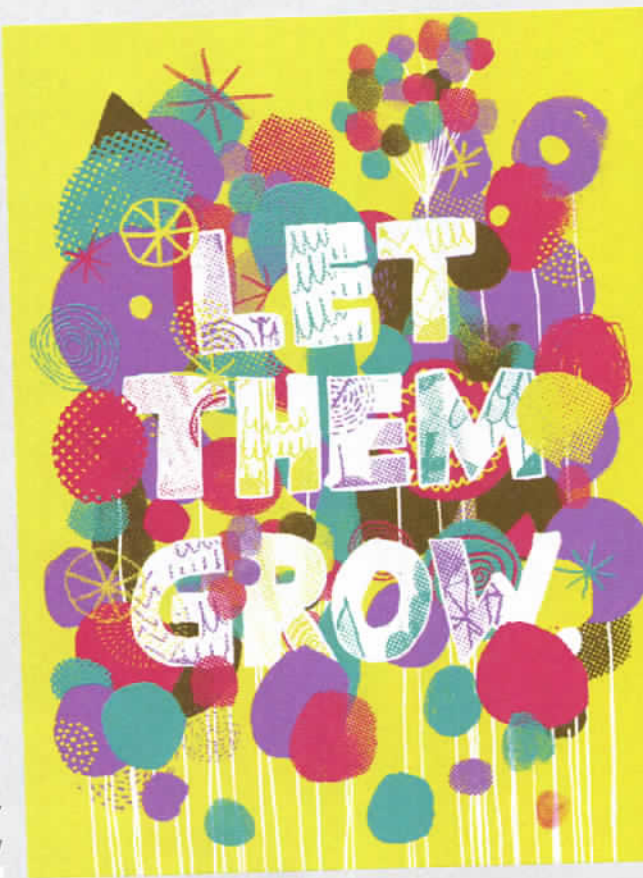
"Ignorance is bliss," 'tis folly to be wise.

NANCY SKOLOS
Ignorance Is Bliss

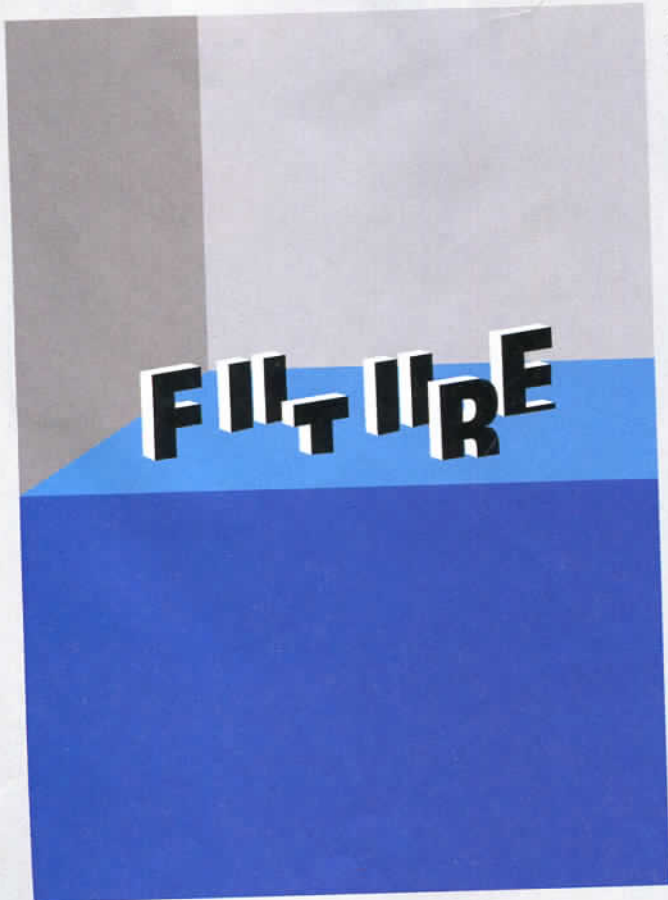




EVERYTHING STUDIO
Earth



MIKE PERRY
Let Them Grow



LAUREN PERLOW
S.O.S.

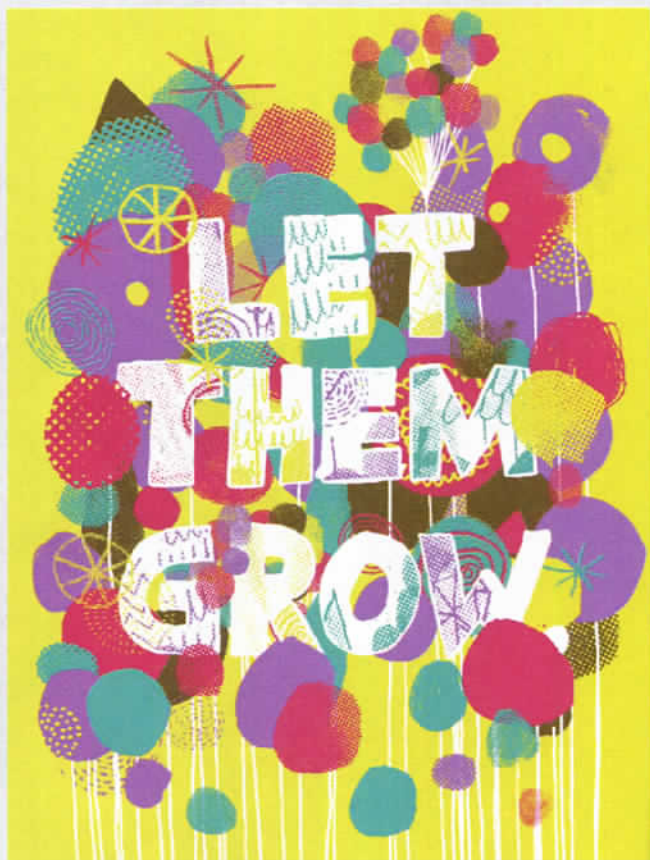


JAMES VICTORE
Save the Plants



EVERYTHING STUDIO

Earth



MIKE PERRY

Let Them Grow



LAUREN PERLOW

S.O.S.



JAMES VICTORE

Save the Plants

SHEPARD FAIREY

Power Up Windmill

Fairey rose to fame during the 2008 presidential elections with his now iconic posters of Barack Obama. He created this image for MoveOn in 2009.



"I created this windmill image as a patriotic symbol of the green-energy mission," Shepard Fairey says.