Ours
Democracy in the Age of Branding

Exhibition dates
October 16, 2008–February 1, 2009

Parsons The New School for Design
Anna-Maria and Stephen Kellen Gallery
Sheila C. Johnson Design Center
66 Fifth Avenue, entrance at 13th Street
New York, NY 10011
www.newschool.edu/johnsondesigncenter

Hours
Monday–Friday, 10 a.m.–8 p.m.
Saturday–Sunday, 12 p.m.–6 p.m.
Free admission

Presented by Parsons The New School for Design,
in collaboration with the Vera List Center for Art
and Politics at The New School.

Curated by Carin Kuoni;
Web component curated by Marisa Olson;
Bartholomew Ryan and Jakob Schillinger,
curatorial assistants.
Exhibition and graphic design by Project Projects.

www.branding-democracy.org

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for the Visual Arts.

Participants
Yael Bartana
Erick Beltrán
Alexis Bhagat
Paul Chan
Simon Critchley
Joseph DeLappe
Alexandra Domanovic
Sam Durant
Kota Ezawa
Andrea Geyer
Liam Gillick
Boris Groys
Victoria Hattam
Sharon Hayes
Susan Hiller
I Approve This Message
Institute for Infinitely Small Things
Emma Kay
Komar & Melamid
Asaf Koriat
Runo Lagomarsino
Steve Lambert
Les Liens Invisibles
Ligorano/Reese
Miguel Luciano
Michael Mandiberg
Emery Martin
Aleksandra Mir
Carlos Motta

Dave Muller
Timo Nasseri
Ariel Orozco
Trevor Paglen
PETLab
Nadine Robinson
Anri Sala
Hank Willis Thomas
Johan Tirén
Brian Tolle
Judi Werthein
Wooloo Productions
The Yes Men
Carey Young

PARSONS THE NEW SCHOOL FOR DESIGN
When the U.S. launched its military campaign in Iraq in defense of democracy, it announced at the same time a “war of ideas,” a marketing campaign to export American values worldwide. These values invoke “freedom” and “individuality” as the twin poles of American identity and have become increasingly indivisible from the language of advertising. Democracy has become a global brand, available to any consumer and evoked by regimes of all stripes.

During the final stages of the American presidential elections, Parsons The New School for Design presents OURS: Democracy in the Age of Branding to investigate democracy positioned as consumer brand. The exhibition acknowledges the emerging convergence of art and design, and invites practitioners in this hybrid field to ask questions about our democracy now: What does participation mean? What kind of commitment is made in a democratic election—by voters as well as by elected representatives? What is the extent of community, and what form does refusal take? What are the visible and the invisible structures on which democracy is built; who and what gets represented, and who and what doesn’t? Does instant gratification apply equally to the electoral process and the global market economy? And, finally, is true democracy eternally deferred, a condition that is in constant formation and always entails speculation?

Step in and climb the stage to experience what democracy and participation mean. Make a chicken pee, and discover what people don’t say in public. Re-shuffle the cards of history, and create your own protest posters with historic rubber stamps. Consider the cardinal points, and imagine “the North” and “the South” or the impermeable U.S. border. Go to Chicago—again—and celebrate history and future.

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Curatorial statements

In essence, the exhibition is a stage, conceived as a platform for debate, and consisting of four distinct structures that each feature analytical as well as generative elements. In keeping with Parsons’ educational mission, OURS illuminates the practical implications of a critical position.

The first element of the show is a central platform designed by Liam Gillick that is the site of lectures, performances, charrettes (solution-driven workshops), and panels. Many works—both in the gallery and on the Web—surround this central site where democracy is generated (or consumed?), and field the ideas for those participatory processes and discussions. A second layer consists of interpretative materials that both contextualize the exhibition and create ephemeral brands themselves—this exhibition guide being one of them, supplemented by an audio guide with artists’ statements, handouts, the stickers, and a number of posters, all of which act as vehicles for a self-reflective process. The third structure is made up of workshops inserted into existing classes at Parsons that, for the first time, are being held in the actual gallery space, on the platform. Modeled on design charrettes, which are effective and entertaining combinations of concept and mobilization, these workshops pose specific challenges and call for immediate practical solutions. The fourth structure includes public lectures and panels that further illuminate the subject.

All these elements have different temporalities, and last from a couple of hours to three months. The exhibition’s Web site documents ongoing aspects of the show, such as evolving works on the blackboard and in the gallery windows. Election Day is marked by a daylong performance by PETLab, and a switch in one of the video booths: until November 4, the booth serves as a media headquarters, with transmissions covering the U.S. elections streaming in from around the world. A week later, it features Susan Hiller’s The Last Silent Movie, with words in languages no longer spoken, erased by the global race for majority rule.

In an initial reading, OURS: Democracy in the Age of Branding examines desires generated and promoted by the brand of American democracy—such as choice, participation, freedom of expression, a sense of belonging and the promise of individual success, all embodied in the notion of “liberty”—and looks at how and where these desires find fulfillment, or not. Works dealing with the decor of our homes or our cities are as much part of this discussion as those featuring the visual emblems of democratic governments and of material success. A second trajectory investigates both aesthetic and political systems of representation developed in response to these desires and, in particular, addresses the unrepresented: the voiceless excluded from representation on the one hand and the power structures that run parallel to democratic governments on the other. Works dealing with our media landscape, with secret military units and official government pronouncements fall within this segment of the show.

The central platform is a focus of OURS—simultaneously a place of confinement and a zone of privilege that highlights the speculative nature of both the democratic process and the brand: entering this space implicates the visitor in all actions that happen within. A decision to commit, participate, or refuse must be taken. Informed by notions of legitimacy, entitlement and desire, this decision or choice, however, never leaves us entirely satisfied. We remain in a state of perpetual speculation.

—Carin Kuoni, curator

The question of democracy’s dissemination in the era of network culture is a tenuous one. The Internet has ushered in an era of illegal government surveillance, increased censorship, retrograde copyright enforcement, linguistic hegemony, and a new model for mediated power relationships in which agency and class are largely predetermined by access to technology. None of this is particularly democratic—at least not insofar as we envision democracy as a system in which everyone has an equal opportunity for representation and expression. With the spread of this invention (emanating from the U.S. military after all) and despite its predication on a model of democracy, these network conditions are also diffused. In turn, networks create opportunities for exchange across vast spaces and collaboration with others near and far.

Censorship notwithstanding, the Internet introduces people to new ideas and possibilities, and gives them a sense of choice—the other cornerstone of the democratic fantasy. Networked communication enables the articulation and distribution of this fantasy. But the codes, conduits, and cultural cues around which this communication is structured also invite parody, intervention, and deconstruction, not least by virtue of their copy-and-paste aesthetics that practically beg for appropriation, mimicry, and détournement. This is the interesting paradox that informs the works in this exhibition. Network culture has given us new challenges to our civil liberties and new tools for combating these challenges. And the question of branding is a perfect point of entry for such an enterprise. What is branding if not a highly-mediated, visually-based form of communication whose rhetorical and psychological impacts are just as precisely calculated as the military’s psychological operations (PSYOPs) or the Soviets’ “Cinema of Attractions.” The Internet makes the “source code” of these missives transparent and editable. Taking this DIY political aesthetic into their own hands, the Web-based artists in OURS reflect on contemporary politics—whether it is the state of things in the U.S. or abroad. While some identify specific problems and solutions, others simply afford us new ways to look at the world. What better aspiration for a work of art in these troubled times?

—Marisa Olson, Web curator
Programs

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 16

MIGUEL LUCIANO
Charrette with artist and Parsons class (open to the public) 9:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m. Presentation: 6:30 – 8:00 p.m. Anna-Maria and Stephen Kellen Gallery

Miguel Luciano’s work considers the overlapping spheres of capitalism and blackness. In this charrette, the students are invited to participate in a game of “stick in the mud” to develop a visual可疑, which the students are then asked to produce and reproduce another in the gallery of their choice. These drawings are then published in Luciano’s installation piece, Gains in the Galliard Mean (when Ben Perri), a repurposed vending machine, where they will eventually find their way impeding “consumption.”

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 22

SAM DURANT
Charrette with artist and Parsons class (open to the public) 9:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m. Presentation: 6:30 – 8:00 p.m. Anna-Maria and Stephen Kellen Gallery

A World Map is an ongoing project that links map shape and self-imposed silences. In this charrette, the students are divided into six groups, and each group is given the task of depicting different cultural regions of the world in a way that reflects the diversity of its inhabitants. The resulting maps are then displayed in the gallery in a series of large-scale installations. The students are encouraged to interact with the maps and to discuss their meanings with each other.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 27

ALEXIS BHAGAT
Charrette with artist and Parsons class (open to the public) 9:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m. Presentation: 6:30 – 8:00 p.m. Anna-Maria and Stephen Kellen Gallery

This charrette is based on Judy Chicago’s work, a uniquely designed charrette that was commissioned for live in 2001 to Mexican immigrants who were about to attempt an illegal crossing into the U.S. The Toppled Brinco (Brinco) is pared “jump” after the local inhabitants for crossing the border, each pin contains a piece of the border area (in the form of the seed), a compass, a wallet, pockets to hide money and other necessities, such as an image of Santo Tomas and the Mexican national anthem. The Mexican immigrant.

With his large blockhead, A World Map is essentially a topographical map of the earth. The project involves public participation, with artists invited to create a visual representation of the earth that can enter the public sphere.

In conjunction with the exhibition, the New York State Department of State hosts a special panel discussion on the theme of Branding Democracy. The panel is moderated by Simon Critchley, philosopher and director of the Parsons School of Social Research and at University of Texas, Austin. Critchley researches on the history of philosophy, literature, ethics, and politics.

In keeping with this political moment, the show opens a new conversation on the subject of democracy and the current political climate. The exhibition focuses on one of the two candidates: Donald Trump or the “American Void.” Critchley’s lecture examines the cultural, economic, and political ways in which the presidential election has been structured and the existential detachment that seems to haunt him, and its relation to democracy. Obama as the ultimate defeat.

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 18

SIMON CRITCHELEY
BAHAG, OBAMA AND THE AMERICAN VOID
Lecture: 6:30 – 8:00 p.m. Union Square Student Center

Admission: Free to all students and New School faculty, staff, and alumni with ID.

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the detached gaze at democracy is free of any political view. All is revealed in this picture, the copypaste machineries of a society that is the master of itself, which is the mode under which our democratic process operates. As a U.S. citizen, I embrace this apocalypse of democratic look.

Arabella Gillick's site-specific installation occupies a small white space, a charrette on October 23.


Erick Beltrán's design-oriented project includes an innovative use of typography or in the many ways language and meaning are formed whether in the graphic designer's use of graphics or the many variations that alphabetical forms can take across cultures.

Erick Beltrán developed a "production site," stationed in the gallery's first floor. His art work consists of an archive of 100 repurposed newspapers' images, documenting the art work's visual language and meaning. The art work's visual language and meaning are formed through structures that are often arbitrary, though they may seem standard and unattainable. The narrative concentrates on the visual and graphic formation of language, and whether in the graphic designer's use of graphics or the many variations that alphabetical forms can take across cultures.

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At sea as a promotional ad and a speculative performance, Project Arts Center’s Peking2008 in the trailer or placeholder for an exchange in which the artists would—for the cost of their travel expenses—transport the territory of the local American community, around which the respective parties would first meet and consume on America. The form of this contract recall the painting of rogue nations Western nations to which confluence over frontiers entrenched imperialist fantasies.

The vending machine greets visitors upon entering the gallery, and offers a complete and highly interactive process creating and proposing all kinds of national mini-broads. The actual posters—based on the maps—are still current, and ideas that today are not ordinarily seen and known are further embedded in a chart-view in solution-driven workshops with patrons and students. See http://www.shieldspace.com/?q=oilstandard

To understand why, come to a rare screening of this film. “You can speak again when the boring is out of you!”

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Economist and the breed of democracy. For instance the American ideal of consumer debt, items for sale and the lack of critical discourse about consumer debt, national identity, immigration, and the lost image of Che, the Irish illustrator and cartoonist who released the image many years ago copyrights.

Runo Lagomarsino (Poland, 1967; active in Boston)

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The cartoon appeared along with The Yes Men use “culture jamming” to highlight the absurd of Dow virulently denying the claim. The activist group was founded by Andrew Bacevich and Brian Tolle, and his conception of “pure means” (1987) evokes Walter Benjamin’s critique of “the mechanical reproduction of art objects” as a form of “degenerate culture.”

The Yes Men are presenting a new work that considers personal and public domains. The project draws on previous interventions and past works by the collective’s founders in which the concept of national identity is assaulted by virtually anything black-and-white, and the resulting archive documents the myriad ways in which people around the world respond to this problematic identity.


The exhibition design of OURS operates as a participatory framework, actively shaping and altering visitors’ experiences. Employing dislocative processes and visual form, the design strategy enacts the innate conflict in the democratic process between centralized control and individual choice.

Upon entering the exhibition, visitors are asked to wear an admission sticker resembling a campaign button. While this procedure is familiar from both art museums and political events, visitors have to choose between a red or blue sticker, marking them immediately as members of one of two groups (as well as of the larger group of exhibition-goers). Subsequently, visitors’ rejection and disposal of the stickers may generate detritus in the clarity of the exhibition’s presentation and its sense of authoritative graphic identity.

Throughout the exhibition, the dichotomy between the colors red and blue offers the appearance of alternatives. This nod to agency proves to be illusory: color is used arbitrarily to both package identical contents, as well as to suggest choice between incomparable objects. Additionally, a multitude of typefaces are utilized to create the appearance of visual diversity. However, none of these typefaces are designed from a single hand—that of canonical Swiss type designer Adrian Frutiger (1928–). Frutiger is best known for designing Univers (1957), a systematized family of typefaces merging Forstdist rationalization with a touch of calligraphic humanism.

The OURS design system is totalizing and open-ended, monolithic and chaotic, autocratic and motley. Through these unresolved contradictions, the design acts to extend, question, and comment upon the show’s democratic process between centralized control and individual choice.

—Project Purposes, Exhibition and graphic designers