



During the last presidential election, artist Shepard Fairey's poster of Barack Obama—a graphic, vaguely Russian-propagandist-looking portrait of the then candidate with the word HOPE drawn in big, bold letters underneath—achieved the rare feat of becoming a visual emblem of a moment in American history. Obama, of course, won the election.

But the ensuing 18 months have been transformative for Fairey, too. Up until a couple of years ago, he was best known in the skateboarding and street-art worlds for his Obey Giant campaign. Conceived while Fairey was a student at the Rhode Island School of Design in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the project involved stickering, stenciling, and painting slogans such as THIS IS YOUR GOD and images of the late professional wrestler Andre the Giant in public spaces in major cities around the globe. But while the Obama poster—as well as a diverse, complex, and at times controversial body of work that stretches back two decades—helped set the stage for Fairey's first solo museum show, titled *Supply and Demand*, at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston last year, it also attracted a different kind of attention. Early last year, Fairey became embroiled in a contentious—and potentially precedent-setting—lawsuit with the Associated Press over his unauthorized use of one of the news service's photographs, which was taken by photographer Mannie Garcia in 2006, as a reference for the Obama portrait. In a nutshell: The AP claims that Fairey's use of the image is copyright infringement; Fairey believes that in making the portrait, he was just exercising his First Amendment rights and that his use of the image as a reference falls under the category of fair use. Fairey's admission in late fall that he attempted to destroy evidence of his using the Garcia image as a reference has thrown a new wrinkle into the proceedings.

Fairey's work, which combines elements of graffiti, pop art, business art, appropriation art, and Marxist theory, has long been divisive. His supporters point to the viral nature of his images, the DIY ethic behind his operation, and the brute cultural impact of his work. His critics have accused him of everything from being the proverbial sell out (Fairey produces a clothing line, Obey, as a commercial extension of the Obey Giant project, and has done work for Pepsi and others) to exploiting politically charged imagery (pieces have depicted Black Panthers and Zapatistas) to too closely appropriating the work of other artists and hastening the over-commercialization of street culture. But Fairey, now 40, remains ambivalent about both achieving art-world validation and retaining his street cred, aware that artists whose works hang in the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C.—as his own Obama portrait does—aren't necessarily insiders, but they are no longer outsiders, either.

This month, Fairey has a new show at New York City's Deitch Projects—the last show at the gallery before owner Jeffrey Deitch packs up and heads west to assume his new post as director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Iggy Pop recently spoke with the Charleston, South Carolina–born Fairey, who was putting some finishing touches on pieces for the Deitch exhibition in his Los Angeles studio.

IGGY POP: I wanted to start out by talking to you about the biggest mess you've created, which is the Barack Obama piece you made in the run-up to the last election. My first thought was that it reminded me a little of something I would have seen in the Middle East—you know, the kind of simple picture of a leader that you see go up when there's going to be civil unrest or when they die. What were you thinking when you made that image?

SHEPARD FAIREY: I created the Obama image with a little bit of a different intention than a lot of other stuff that I make. It's not that I haven't put people who I admire on pedestals before, but they were usually people like the members of Black Sabbath or the Black Panthers. I've also made a lot of political art in the past where I was criticizing people like George W. Bush—I worked very hard in 2004 to make anti-Bush imagery. But then Bush got reelected, and so I thought I needed to reevaluate my approach to mainstream politics. At that point, I'd had a kid, a daughter, and as the 2008 election campaign was beginning, I had a second daughter on the way. So I started to think, "This isn't about me augmenting my existing brand of pissed-off rebellion. This is about my daughters' future." I wanted it to have a stylistic connection to my other work, so I didn't use the typical red, white, and blue—I used the red that I use, and that cream background, and then I worked with different shades of blue so the image had that patriotic feel. I wanted to make an image that deracialized Obama, where he's not a black man, but a *nationalized* man. And then, secondly, when a person is turned into a stylized or idealized icon, it means that someone has decided that the person is worthy of this treatment, and the viewer then maybe takes a step back and says, "Well, they've been validated by someone, so maybe I should look at them a little more closely and decide whether they're worthy of that validation." So my thinking was that if people took that step, then I was pretty sure that they would want Obama to be president. His opposition to the war in Iraq when it was an unpopular position, his stands on health-care reform and the environment and decreasing the power of lobbyists—those were all things that resonated with me.

POP: And yet you had the good sense not to reference any of those issues in the piece itself, because it wouldn't have had the impact.

FAIREY: Yeah, well, I hate to say this, and some people might get very angry, but the American public is generally pretty superficial, so an image like that just allows them to project whatever limited idea they have onto it. Obviously, not everyone is like that—I actually think there were a lot of people who were bummed by the image because they felt it was shallow propaganda.

POP: I think I've seen the image both with and without the word HOPE. Is that correct?

FAIREY: Yeah, that is correct. I actually initially used the word PROGRESS. I felt like if Obama were elected, then he would shift what was the status quo, and then that would be progress. I did the poster without any input from the campaign—I just did it as a grassroots thing. I figured the campaign wouldn't want my help because I'm too controversial, kind of like the [Louis] Farrakhan endorsement, where they said, "Thanks, but no thanks." But when I heard that they did like the image, my friend who was sort of the liaison said, "They love the image, but they really like the word HOPE or CHANGE better. . . ." I was told that *progress* leads to *progressive*, which leads to socialism. So I chose *hope* as the word, because the more I thought about it, the more I realized that people are complacent and apathetic when they're hopeless, and so hope leads to action. It's also hard to be anti-hope. It's one of those bulletproof things.

POP: Did any trouble or negative energy come shooting your way?

FAIREY: Well, I got plenty of hate on the Internet—and not only from right-wingers. There were people from my own cultural background who said that I'd sold out if I wasn't pushing for Ralph Nader. And then I'm being sued by the Associated Press over the reference image I used to create the illustration.

POP: That's why I was asking. [*laughs*]

FAIREY: The image was created from a news photograph from a 2006 panel on Darfur that Obama attended, so it didn't have anything to do with the campaign. I feel like what I did was both aesthetically and conceptually transformative. I think it's fair use, but the Associated Press thinks it's copyright infringement, and they're really going after me. It would bankrupt me entirely if they won, so I'm hoping, for the sake of creative expression and political speech, that that doesn't happen.

POP: The whole idea of copyright and ownership seems to be shifting.

FAIREY: Well, I do think that copyrights and intellectual property are important—it's important to be able to keep people from making verbatim copies of a particular creation that could somehow hurt the creator. If I spend time conceiving and making a piece of art and somebody else sees that it has market value and replicates it in order to steal part of my market, then that's

not cool. But the way I make art—the way a lot of people make art—is as an extension of language and communication, where references are incredibly important. It's about making a work that is inspired by something preexisting but changes it to have a new value and meaning that doesn't in any way take away from the original—and, in fact, might provide the original with a second life or a new audience.

POP: It's viral.

FAIREY: Exactly. The problem with copyright enforcement is that when the parameters aren't incredibly well defined, it means big corporations, who have deeper pockets and better lawyers, can bully people. I don't want to start making enemies in the corporate world, but there are plenty of cases. For example, there is a tradition of certain fairy tales being reinterpreted, and now, all of a sudden, a big corporation that has a mouse on its logo decides it's going to copyright these fairy tales, which ends the cycle of these things being reinterpreted. What happens with these big entertainment companies is that they start to get a monopoly on the creation of culture. But I think that the more people participate in the creation of culture, the richer the culture becomes. In the case of the Obama poster, I was just exercising my First Amendment rights—and my free speech is exercised visually. People who want to talk or write in order to share an opinion about Obama can do that, but when I want to say what I think about him, I need to make a portrait. And if I can't make a picture based on a reference because all references are copyrighted, then my only options are to pay a licensing fee—and possibly be turned down because the person licensing the image doesn't agree with my political viewpoint—or to try to get a personal sitting with Barack Obama to make a portrait of him, which presents its own obstacles. So I don't think all this is good for free speech.

POP: The record company is going to hate me for this, but as an artist, when people do things that are inspired by me or my work, I'm happy when I get paid and I'm just as happy when I don't. In the end, I think it's the communication of the ideas that really matters.

FAIREY: In a broad way, that's the most valuable thing to me, as well. If you're creating something that has some sort of cultural currency—if the idea is getting out there—then that will probably yield money in some form, whether it's through selling art or selling books or being asked to give a lecture.

POP: I read something that you wrote, which I entirely understood: that even thinking about entering an art gallery makes you want to doze off.

FAIREY: For me, there has always been a disconnect with the sort of elitist structure of the high-art world—and my distaste for that is at odds with my feeling that art should aspire to do great things. But there's something powerful about seeing art in public spaces that has a function other than just advertising that's selling a product. I'm not saying I'm above any of this—I'm a part of it. But one of the things I love about doing what I do is that I am in the mix with people. It's not like when people walk into a gallery and say, "I know this piece is supposed to be good because it's in a gallery, so I'll just go along with the idea that it's brilliant and wonderful." On the street, people aren't bashful. They will say if they like something or if they think it sucks.

POP: I lived in Berlin when the wall was still up, and East Berlin was the communist zone. They had imagery there on the walls of the buildings—sanctioned imagery—that was the nearest thing to some of your Andre the Giants and some of your other larger, simpler imagery. The one in Berlin that I liked best was about seven stories high. It was a milk bottle and it had a slogan, in German, which essentially said, DRINK MILK! DRINK *MILCH!* It used to fascinate me, because growing up in Michigan in my particular town, we had Milky the Clown—this clown who drank lots of milk. But obviously someone in Germany must have thought, “Well, there’s advertising in the West, and we haven’t got any, so we better catch up. But how can we do this in a positive way? We’ll encourage people to drink *milch!*” There was another one that I remember seeing the first time I ever drove into East Germany. I still don’t know what it meant, but it was on a banner that was strung from an expressway overpass, and it just said, I AM NEAR. I assumed the banner was referring to the leader.

FAIREY: There are so many ways that could be interpreted. “If you’re thinking of defecting, don’t do it because I am near—I am looking right over your shoulder.”

POP: Comforting?

FAIREY: In a paternalistic, protective way. It’s just open-ended enough to be spun whatever way is useful. When I came up with the tagline OBEY for my work, it was based on the idea that there are forces all around us that have agendas, but they are frequently unspoken. So what I was doing was crystallizing that into something tangible. I thought it would make people think about all the mechanisms of control out there. A banner like the one you’re describing is going to set you on that course pretty quickly. But advertising is often packaged in a way that’s friendly, so people don’t think about the I AM NEAR or OBEY element. The funny thing is that a lot of people have told me that my work looks communist. But that’s just because they’re associating it with Russian constructivism, which was such a powerful graphic design. A lot of people think of Russian constructivism as being all about promoting Marx and Lenin, but there were actually state-owned department stores that employed that kind of design and messaging to get people to buy things. They also did some great stuff with it for the airline Aeroflot. So I think the idea of propaganda and advertising being one and the same has been around for a while.

POP: Interestingly, in light of what you’ve just said, there’s a certain amount of freedom from meaning in your imagery. Freedom was very, very important to me when I was young. When I did “I Got a Right,” I had come to the conclusion that the freedoms that we were taught about in civics class didn’t actually exist, and so I was going to have to declare my own. That song was my little declaration of independence. But now I’m at a point where I can just put the top down on my convertible and feel the breeze in my face and feel pretty free. It’s one of those big hokey questions, but what is freedom? What does that mean to you right now?

FAIREY: I think the idea of freedom or liberty is really misused for political reasons, but it’s something that resonates with people to the core. People want to be masters of their own destinies, but at the same time, I think they do so selectively. Sometimes they want to be told exactly what to do so they don’t have to think for themselves—as long as they can still exercise their free will.

POP: So as long as they can put the top down whenever they want.

FAIREY: Yes. But if that's the one thing that you need, then I know how I can control you. I'll just let you put the top down whenever you want but keep you under my thumb in every other area. So I actually think that the open-endedness of some of my work is important because people do want to be able to come to their own conclusions and make their own decisions. Personally, I'm very worried about my freedom right now because a lot of my freedom depends on my ability to finance my art-making and traveling and putting stuff up. If I lose my AP case, then I basically will have lost the last 20 years of my life. The freedom to express myself the way that I want to is very important to me. My biggest fear is not just that I'm going to go out of business and back to square one, but that all artists can valuably contribute to the cultural dialogue, no matter what their politics are. Whether people agree or don't agree with me, the idea that these images need to be made without artists worrying that they're going to be sued is important. If I had just taken the photograph itself and reproduced it verbatim with the words ELECT OBAMA or HOPE underneath it, then I don't think it would have caught on—and it would have been copyright infringement.

POP: I wanted to ask you: What are the activities of Obey? Who are the members of the Obey organization? Are there a thousand of you? Three of you? FAIREY: I started with the Andre stuff in '89 and then moved on to Obey in '95. My dilemma was always that I wanted to do the street-art project, and I wanted to make posters and antagonize people with cool visuals, but I didn't know how to make a living doing it. I came up through skating and punk rock, and everybody in those cultures wears T-shirts. So I'm out there doing this street-art stuff, and I think that maybe what I can do to pay for it is to make some T-shirts and prints and stickers that I can sell. That was basically the genesis of all my entrepreneurial endeavors, which were very much an afterthought. Now I have a crew of about four art assistants who help me do the murals on the street and everything. One of them was actually the baby on the cover of Nirvana's *Nevermind* [1991]. He's 19, and he's really into drawing and street art and all that stuff.

POP: So that's the posse.

FAIREY: We've got those guys. I've sort of built the whole Obey thing around the idea that all these people can work on the art side and the business side, and this sort of utopian ideal of art and commerce working in harmony somehow functions. My dad always had a really great work ethic. He always accused me of being a hedonist, because all I wanted to do was skateboard. But I worked hard at skateboarding when I was in high school. And I've found that everything worth trying to get is maybe worth a little extra effort—versus just plugging into the grid or whatever. I think the biggest thing that people fear when it comes to art becoming a business is those authentic, pure aspirations of art being compromised. But I've never put business before what I've wanted to say. One of the reasons I worked for years as a graphic designer was that I knew I'd have a solid income. So if I made an anti-Bush or anti-war-in-Iraq poster when it was an unpopular position, it wouldn't matter that 25 percent of my e-mail group unsubscribed—which is actually what happened at the time. I could say exactly what I wanted to say and not worry about the commercial implications.

POP: So maybe sometimes you have to go through the shit of the system in order to come out the other side.

FAIREY: I think there are two different kinds of struggles. When I started out, I was working a \$4.25-an-hour job at a skate shop making paper stickers, and I really felt like it was me against the world, which can really be very motivating. That instinct to just survive is pretty powerful. But then there's another kind of struggle, which is the struggle I have with myself in terms of how I can evolve my ideas and push them forward based on the fact that I'm not going to be perceived as a complete outsider anymore. It's the struggle of evolution, and not just clinging to this romantic idea of, "I'm a 20-year-old outsider, punk rock kid, putting up stickers in cities. No one knows what it is or who I am." So I feel that as long as I maintain that struggle within myself, I haven't become complacent.

Iggy Pop is a Musician and punk rock icon. He was recently inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame with his band, The Stooges.