

Designing Resistance: Matthew Galloway's *The Freedom of the Migrant* and the Wellington Media Collective's *Not Neutral*

Two complimentary exhibitions, Matthew Galloway's *The Freedom of the Migrant* and the Wellington Media Collective's *Not Neutral* are currently on show at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery. *Not Neutral* is a representative selection of posters produced by the Wellington Media Collective (WMC), active in Wellington between 1978 and 1998, while Matthew Galloway's exhibition focusses on a singular contemporary political event occurring in 2016. What they share is a commitment to graphic design practices in order to communicate to a public issues concerning social justice, equality, human rights and freedoms.

The Freedom of the Migrant includes a newsprint publication that visitors can remove from the space and read in their own time. Its premise centres on an article published in the New Zealand Herald on May 26th 2016 by columnist Fran O'Sullivan that reflects on comments by former Prime Minister John Key. Key presented a hypothetical scenario to members of the business community in Auckland shortly after returning from a meeting of the International Democrat Union (IDU). Key speculated that if Isis wanted to destabilise Europe, they could insert a jihadi among refugees, killing people in the middle of Berlin then turning the gun on themselves. This, in turn, according to Key's hypothesis, would compromise Angela Merkel's government, as well as Germany's leadership of Europe.

The IDU was formed in 1983 to provide a forum for centre-right parties from around the world that share common beliefs, 'having regard to the important global tasks which render necessary and desirable a closer and efficient collaboration of their parties, inspired by their common conviction'¹. Key, as chairperson of the IDU at the time of O'Sullivan's article, stated the belief that 'free-flowing terrorism in Europe is here to stay' and positioned New Zealand as a 'Switzerland of the south' where wealthy individuals wishing to escape the danger of terrorism in Europe (and by association the refugee crisis) could come to live and invest in this country.

Galloway's exhibition utilises graphic design to interrogate an event which sits at the centre of a constellation of political and geographical forces and flows. This event connects to this constellation, and it both influences and is influenced by it. The objects in the exhibition act as markers, foregrounding the various strands of inquiry into O'Sullivan's article that Galloway chooses to focus on. These can be divided roughly into five components: a deconstructed glasshouse embossed with words and phrases, textile flags, a newsprint publication, graphics placed directly onto the wall and a series of red acrylic objects in various stages of deconstruction. These elements tie-in with a visual language Galloway has employed in a number of his recent shows, including *Speaking Places: How to Work* and *Hamilton 2015, The Ground Swallows You* and *Beyond Exhausted*, as well as in the group shows *Beachhead's Piece of Mind* and *This Time of Useful Consciousness*.

The WMC's statement from a 1978 brochure 'we will work with you, not for you' embodied its ethos of helping broadly leftist groups to realise their goals by using graphic design as a mode of communication to bolster their message. These were a range of collectives and communities,

¹ 'History', The International Democratic Union, accessed May 15, 2018, <http://www.idu.org/about/history/>

including trade unions, feminist and Māori sovereignty groups, and arts organisations. Early on the WMC's intention was 'to spread the skills of printing and allied processes to those progressive groups of people in the community who traditionally have little or no access to these skills.'²

The WMC was also influenced by the protest culture of the 60s and 70s. The Vietnam War protests, the May 1968 disruptions in Paris and the Black Panthers in the United States contributed to a visual language that developed out of this period, favouring bold, bright colours and sharp-lined graphics. The messages were usually succinct, intended to convey a simple message quickly and effectively. To this end, the posters of the Black Panther Party, Cold War-era Cuban posters, the May 68 posters of Atelier Populaire and those of Tin Sheds from the University of Sydney were all inspirations for the graphic content of WMC's output. Indeed, the poster with the cartoon illustration of the policeman behind a riot shield with raised truncheon on display was originally produced by Atelier Populaire, that was comprised of protesting art students during their occupation of the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris during the events of May 1968. The WMC design adds its own text on the riot shield: 'Have a bash with New Zealand's top street gang.'

However, the intention was to locate these influences in a New Zealand context; to mine the affecting design approaches to draw attention to the issues confronting New Zealand, as a nation in the Pacific, a society with specific concerns. The use of these graphic design techniques did not imply a transmission of any ideological import associated with the groups producing the content — although some of the concerns would resonate — but to use the graphic techniques as conduits for directing attention to the causes of the groups working with the WMC, rather than co-opting existing ones. As Dave Kent, one of the initial nineteen members of the collective notes: "I just channel these design conventions without being particularly conscious of whether they were national or international."³

Not Neutral uses the impact of the design of the posters in the exhibition design itself. It subverts the normative practice of showing art on white walls, which have been painted a contrasting diagonal black and green. The WMC's logo, a red heart within a yellow star surrounded by a red circle, takes up a prominent space on the wall next to the didactic. The exhibition's title, in large red and yellow lettering, curves around a corner of the wall. These colours and symbols are evocative of various leftist movements; green and black are the colours of green anarchism, while the star is a common symbol associated with communism and socialism. However, in the exhibition these colours are used to play on notions of whenua and consciousness, where the green can be construed as the landscape on which the issues addressed by the posters take place, or as an active awareness arising out of the darkness of a lack of knowledge.⁴ The WMC was not politically aligned to any ideology, but as the exhibition makes clear, its ideals were sympathetic to causes on the left of the political spectrum. The inference is that even now, with the benefit of hindsight, it is impossible to adopt a politically neutral stance towards the causes embodied in the posters, even in a space as supposedly non-partisan as the art gallery.

² Cantlon, Polly, 'Design Democracy' in *We Will Work With You: Wellington Media Collective 1978-1998*, edited by Mark Derby, Jennifer Rouse and Ian Wedde, pp. 180-209, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2013, P. 182

³ Ibid, p. 207

⁴ Email conversation with Philip Kelly, 14 June, 2018

What links the two exhibitions is the use of design as a conduit for communication and agitation. However, where the WMC's tactics were overt and confrontational, Galloway's use of graphic design is exploratory and generative, reflecting his research-based art practice. His politicised stance results from a thorough reading of O'Sullivan's article and grows out of the conversations had with her and others. This is then translated in the exhibition to a critical take on the issues involved, and provokes a response from visitors. The WMC used the language of advertising to make a statement, enabling the groups it worked with to get a point across to the public with immediacy and impact of the advertising of the time. As Katherine Baxter, one of the founding members of WMC has noted, the environment was one where 'advertising was taking over so we were responding to some of that. Because we were seeing that was one way you could get your message across, so we were a political part of that.'⁵

Galloway also uses design as a mode of communication, but employs the language of the media to flesh out the narrative of O'Sullivan's opinion piece. Using logos, such as that of the IDU and material iconography, like the deconstructed glasshouse, he augments the content of the newspaper and provides an immersive experience led by these different modes of visual communication. As if quoting from the print media, Galloway has enlarged the pages of the paper and transferred them onto paper or textile, where they are affixed to the wall.

It is the popular object that endures in these two exhibitions. The posters in *Not Neutral* may be the only example, or one of only a handful of their type left. These posters were produced for a specific purpose, and once that function was performed, they no longer had a use value at the time. Likewise, with a newspaper, its intended purpose is to convey up to date information. After a day or two has passed, it becomes increasingly less relevant. Within the gallery context, these ephemera become objects that are worthy of care and lasting attention for their historical and contextual relevance.

In addition to this, both exhibitions share a concern for the global, but address it at a local level. The WMC tackled racism in New Zealand and overseas, as well as global issues such as the nuclear free movement and environmental issues, but they did so in a way that kept it relevant to New Zealand and its citizens, and they agitated for change on the local level. *The Freedom of the Migrant* investigates international terrorism and the refugee crisis. Starting from a comment made by John Key in an international forum, it analyses it in the context of worldwide discourses on terror and the movements of refugees, particularly in Europe. Through discussions with New Zealand academics and journalists, these discourses are transposed into events happening in local circumstances. In this way, for both *Not Neutral* and *The Freedom of the Migrant* there is a funnelling of the global into the local, paying attention to events occurring globally and then using their local resonances as an impetus, through graphic design, to educate the public or effect change.

James Hope, June 2018

⁵ Ibid, p. 182

The Wellington Media Collective's book We Will Work With You: Wellington Media Collective 1978-1998 is available from the Dunedin Public Art Gallery's shop. The Freedom of the Migrant and Not Neutral run until August 12, 2018.