

He Might Be Giant: Shepard Fairey

By Michael Dooley

Shepard Fairey barely breaks stride as he slaps a sticker on an electrical box. Then another one on a newspaper rack. A street sign. A bus bench.

A few people who recognize the slightly built Fairey warmly greet and cheer him as though he were a celebrity. But most of the passersby in Silver Lake, a hip but seedy neighborhood that separates Hollywood from downtown Los Angeles, barely pay any attention. It's only afterward that his small, glossy one- and two-color graphics catch their eye. The most striking has the word "obey" in heavy capital letters beside a tightly cropped face with a vacant, but ominous, stare.

The face is a stark, flat, stylized image rendered in sinewy blobs with the symmetry and flavor of a Rorschach blot. And, in fact, it's intended to be open to individual, often conflicting, interpretations. It could be taken as an Orwellian threat, an underground cult, or a sneaky sales ploy. Anyone who recognizes the face as that of the late Andre the Giant, a seven-foot-four, 520-pound pro wrestler, might think it has something to do with the recent upsurge in popularity of the World Wrestling Federation. But the actual meaning has been evolving for over a decade, even for its creator.

Fairey, twenty-nine, knocked out his first version of the "Giant" sticker in five minutes at a Kinko's back in 1989 when he was attending the Rhode Island School of Design. The black-and-white artwork, smaller than three inches, was a grungy photocopy swiped from a newspaper ad. The hastily scrawled text read, "Andre Has a Posse." Fairey was poking fun at his fellow skateboarders, who travel in cliques called posses and unthinkingly decorate their boards with corporate logos. As the crude little stickers increasingly appeared around Providence, they began to capture the imagination of a wider audience.

By taking something with no intrinsic value, like the image of an athlete from a bogus white-trash sport, and elevating it into an icon, Fairey feels he's exposing and subverting consumer culture's susceptibility to propaganda. He prefers using an oblique approach because "I hate stuff that's too self-righteous." Rather than subject people to sloganeering, he wants them to have their own epiphanies.

The closest he's come to didacticism is a manifesto he wrote in 1990 and has since posted on his Web site. He equated his work to the philosopher Heidegger's concept of phenomenology, "the process of letting things manifest themselves." Although he believes "Giant" is something people should grasp intuitively, he came up with a bunch of big words to convince the "intellectual assholes" who require an explanation that there's some legitimacy behind what he's doing. He also thinks it makes them feel they're part of an exclusive clique with access to privileged information.

What began as an inside joke has become for Fairey a single-minded obsession. Every weekend he sets out from San Diego, his Honda Civic packed with stickers, hand-cut stencils, posters, and wheat paste. Nowhere near as large as Andre, he also brings along a sixteen-foot fold-up ladder to allow him access to pole tops, roofs of abandoned buildings, and other hard-to-reach spots that provide dramatic exposure for his larger pieces. Billboards are a favorite location. He once hijacked a 'dozen Sprite "Obey Your Thirst" boards up and down the California coast, obliterating everything but "obey" and turning them into "Giant" boards. For him, "any unadorned surface that isn't going to lower property value" is fair game.

Fairey usually works alone, but he's pulled off several huge installations that involve elaborate planning sessions and accomplices with walkie-talkies on the alert for cops. He also mails his stickers and posters, which now include hundreds of variations with figures as diverse as Jimi Hendrix, Joseph Stalin, and Ming the Merciless, to legions of kindred spirits. Thanks to his own global volunteer posse, there have been "Giant" sightings in Singapore, Russia, and on the Paris gravesite of Doors singer Jim Morrison. Supporters consider him a courageous street activist, a contemporary Dadaist or Situationist, or a postgraffitist who uses the print medium instead of the spray can for tagging.

Along with "Giant," Fairey himself has unwittingly become an urban legend famous for being obscure. But he finds it "totally ironic" that people think he's cool. "I'm a dork. I'm a loser. I'm not cool at all. Everybody just projects their idea of what's cool on me. I'm boring. I never go out. I don't know what's **hip** in music right now or anything."

The self-proclaimed loser has been the subject of a documentary short, *Andre the Giant Has a Posse*, that's screened at New York's Museum of Modern Art as well as Sundance and other festivals. His own work is now being shown at galleries around the world. And he says his obeygiant.com Web site gets 15,000 hits daily.

Frequent targeting of Los Angeles has also gained him the attention of the entertainment media. As a result, his handiwork occasionally pops up in the background on MTV and HBO shows and can also be glimpsed in movies like *Gone in Sixty Seconds*, *The Devil's Own*, and *8mm*. He claims the one in *Batman Forever* was digitally inserted without official approval by a fan working on the film.

Not everyone is a devotee, though. Some people find him naive and delusional about the ability of his graphics to affect change. Most critics simply consider him a vandal. And, in fact, he's willfully engaged in civil disobedience, reclaiming pockets of public space already glutted with establishment propaganda. Consequently, he's been busted five times and continues to risk imprisonment. But he remains unfazed, saying he doesn't care whether people love him or hate him, as long as they respond to what he's doing.

The roots of Fairey's style are diverse. His visual minimalism was inspired by skateboard graphics, which have to jump off the wall in stores to compete with all of the others on display. His appropriation of preprinted source material and his handcrafted production methods grew out of the do-it-yourself punk music aesthetic. His humorous use of mass-media characters is akin to the Church of the SubGenius, a satirical mock-religion that anointed a 1950s clip-art drawing of a pipe-smoking dad as their divine savior. And like Andy Warhol, Fairey has an affinity for high-contrast visuals and for elevating the mundane to the iconic. Covering large surfaces with multiple posters also evokes the pop artist's style, but the repetition motif is based on necessity rather than homage.

Fairey's strongest early influence was L.A.-based guerrilla postermaker Robbie Conal. He says when he saw Conal's 1987 yellow-and-black "Contra Diction" poster, an attack on President Reagan's public lies and obfuscations regarding covert government operations in Iran, "I thought it was so powerful. He had this really unflattering portrait that was a great painting, well executed, but with clever, bold type. I just thought it was a beautiful way to combine art and politics. I loved it." Since then, Fairey and Conal have participated in joint exhibitions.

And like Conal, Fairey has run afoul of the law. He believes his harassment is largely based on community fear of copycat defacements, and suggests that he's being unfairly singled out. "If there's anything that's going to overrun the city, it's movie posters. They're coming down on me for my stuff when it's mostly Universal Pictures or Warner Bros. Records that are paying these snipers to go out and do it. And they're probably a lot easier to track *down* than I am." He says he's stopped canvassing his home base of San Diego because the city found him out and threatened his company with a lawsuit.

That company is Black Market Inc., which he started with partners Dave Kinsey and Philip DeWolff shortly after his 1996 move from Providence to the West Coast. Hidden in a building on the outskirts of downtown San Diego, Black Market is a ten-person visual communications agency that proclaims itself an anomaly. They conduct "guerrilla marketing on a corporate scale" that operates in the gap between underground subculture and the public at large. Specializing in "the development of high-impact marketing campaigns," they number Pepsi, Hasbro, Netscape, NBC, and GTE, as well as film studios and record labels, among their clientele. They're sought out by corporations, staffed by, as Fairey puts it, "a bunch of fifty-year-old schmucks who don't know what's going on," who want to achieve credibility with the youth-culture crowd, the ones who resent and resist typical corporate sales strategies. He now finds himself in a position of designing Mountain Dew graphics during the work week, while liberating Sprite billboards in his free time.

Fairey recently created two-color illustrations of bad-boy comedian Andy Kaufman and his alter ego, Tony Clifton, for Universal's *Man on the Moon* biopic. It was a secondary, supplemental campaign that deviated from the traditional broad-based mainstream ads. Vibrant, harshly colored stickers, stencils, and posters with the words "Andy Lives" were rolled out to fifteen major cities as a way of stimulating curiosity and creating pre-release buzz. He also helped put up some of the posters.

DeeDee Gordon, co-president of Look-Look, the marketing and trend analysis firm that assigned the project, said Fairey was hired "because his style of art resonates with youth. He's created his own grassroots following. People seek out his posters and collect them." She commends Fairey for doing an effective job driving major traffic to the AndyLives.org Web site. As for the unauthorized use of public display space, she has no comment.

Fairey spent only a few hours on the Kaufman drawings. He's managed to streamline his way of creating images to the point where he's pretty fast. "There are a lot of illustrators and painters who do beautiful work that I either don't have the skill or the patience to do," he says. "But you don't have to be God's gift to an artist to be effective. My technique is not that noteworthy. Anybody can steal images and refine them with a little practice. But for me, it's all about impact, and an illustration that's well crafted but doesn't capture somebody's attention is not serving its purpose.

"It seems to me there's more visual stuff than ever out there, more billboards, more more ads, more everything. It's gnarlier than ever, and there just isn't as much room for time-consuming illustration. I look at everything commercially. Supply and demand. If people aren't willing to pay for it, how do you justify the time?"

These days, Fairey's personal project is funded with BlackMarket profits. "I don't even think about 'Giant' as making money, ever. I only think that the more money I make from it, the more stuff I can put out there." He recently agreed to let Lisien.com, a music Web site, create 3,500 posters and 60,000 stickers with "Giant" as its centerpiece. He figures it's another way to mess with people's minds, to have them wonder if "Giant" has just been a ten-year teaser campaign. He also says he was well-compensated in the deal.

Fairey is ambivalent about his role in capitalizing on the capitalists. "I want to encourage people to do not just posters but anything creative that is contrary to being spoon-fed your culture by MTV and all the liber-hip companies. So it's kind of ironic that I'm doing work for those companies. But *somebody's* going to do it. There are a few different forces battling here, and I'm just to the point where I don't have a problem with the contradictions. The world is full of contradictions."

In a 1996 *Wired* magazine article, Fairey was quoted as saying, "I don't like advertising." He now claims his remark was taken out of context. "I was never trying to say advertising in and of itself is wrong. What I was saying was, I don't like the way advertising tries to manipulate, to make people insecure. It's very, very competitive psychological warfare with no rules of combat. It's definitely fair game for vandalizing and critiquing, especially the national campaigns. But everybody makes their own decisions. Nobody twists your arm to smoke or drink. Nobody's making you puke your lunch up to be like women in fashion magazines."

Once upon a time, "Giant" was anti-advertising, a silent spokesperson without a product. Now it's become its own brand, with Fairey negotiating licensing deals for T-shirts, hats, and backpacks. He figures it still has enough street credibility to last a while longer. When he began his project he fantasized it could be taken pretty far, but he never imagined it would be as big as it is now.

Reflecting on the trajectory of his own life, he recalls his childhood in the conservative, old-money section of Charleston, South Carolina, as being very repressed, fraught with frustrations and insecurities. His family discouraged his involvement in punk rock, skateboarding, and other rebellious behavior. "Finally in eighth grade, I had to take a stand for myself and stop fading into the woodwork, even though I risked getting persecuted by my parents and teachers and friends. But I'm glad it happened. I think a lot of people, even if they're unhappy, spend all their lives following the path of least resistance. They're just very meek and obedient."

When asked about the extent his youthful anxieties contribute to his prolonged preoccupation with "Giant," Fairey pauses, then declares, "All the stuff I criticize I'm totally guilty of. Which is why I feel I can comment on it so effectively. I have made, and am still making, the mistakes I'm ridiculing.

"If you had to sum up who I am, 'Giant' is like a mirror to me. It totally reflects my need to get my imprint out there, to satisfy my adrenaline craving, and my artistic craving. You can really understand **me** quickly **just** by looking at 'Giant.' There's not much more to it."

When the time comes to canvass another area of town, Fairey climbs into his Civic and drives off, continuing to obey his inner "Giant."

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