

A Message from Jill Medvedow, Director, Boston ICA

Shepard Fairey's art and arrest have exposed the nerve endings of longtime issues regarding public space, graffiti, fair use and copyright and launched us into a culture war of our own right here in Boston.

The ICA mounted a major exhibition of Shepard Fairey because his artwork is powerful, commanding, and important. Fairey combines strong imagery with abstract pattern and design, and draws on artistic traditions as diverse and historic as Art Nouveau, Islamic abstraction, Cubism, Constructivism, and the great graphic artists and muralists of the Soviet Union and Latin America. Record numbers of people, including teens and young adults are responding enthusiastically to his art, his energy and the ideas and images he's created for public consumption.

As a street artist, Fairey's stunning graphics have been presented on city walls, and other public places. To ensure that Boston audiences could experience Fairey's street art, the ICA worked with both public and private individuals and institutions to provide several sanctioned spaces for Fairey's murals and banners: City Hall Plaza; the House of Blues; the A Street diner, Tufts University, and private homeowners, all of whom granted permission.

In Boston, Fairey did not need to resort to posterizing without consent. Still, consent is one of the key issues addressed in Fairey's art. We are constantly bombarded by unwanted images in the public sphere. These images – wrapped on buses and billboards, for example – are based on an exchange between corporations buying and selling space in the public domain. When a private entity purchases that space in the realm of commerce, it is deemed acceptable. Fairey, with his ironic and iconic OBEY brand, asks us to question that exchange. He is, in fact, breaking the bond of consent to ask where the room is for public consumption of non-commercial images? And who gets to set that agenda?

Consent also relates to Fairey's use of existing photographs in his work, including his transformation of the now iconic photograph of Obama, taken by an Associated Press photographer. Appropriation is a long-standing artistic strategy, used by artists as diverse as Picasso and Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, Jeff Koons, and Richard Prince. Standing in front of the layered, mixed media portrait of Obama hanging in the ICA, one is unmistakably looking at a work of art by Shepard Fairey. His transformation of the original photograph includes digital manipulation, cropping, collage, color, the addition of text, and an intricate use of layering, pattern, logos and design. Artistic transformation is the ethical and legal difference between plagiarism and art.

The vitriolic and knee jerk reaction that all graffiti is the same, that it all contributes to the defacement of our urban environment, and that it is equivalent, according to Boston Globe columnist Kevin Cullen, “to relieving oneself on someone’s private lawn” uses stereotypes to incite resentment, stirring up a backwards-looking sense of us and them and widening the generational divide. Two tickets are waiting in Cullen’s name at the ICA so he can see Fairey’s work, hopefully with an open mind.

Since the arrest, I’ve been asked numerous times if I would like to come home and find my house or our museum covered with graffiti. I would not like that, nor do I wish that experience on others. Shepard Fairey didn’t and doesn’t put his art on people’s homes or on public institutions; his work is primarily on abandoned buildings and derelict sites and many, if not most people, see them as a positive contribution to the visual urban landscape. What Shepard Fairey does do, however, is raise important and loaded questions about the balance between public and private space; about youth and age; about dissemination and distribution of art and imagery in a digital era; about sampling, ownership, intellectual property and fair use. More public space should be public, not privatized. Fair use must extend to artistic intention and transformation. Is it possible to debate and discuss these timely and relevant issues without polarizing neighborhoods and generations? When news of Fairey’s arrest was reported nationwide and internationally, the response was: what do you expect from Boston? I, for one, expect better.