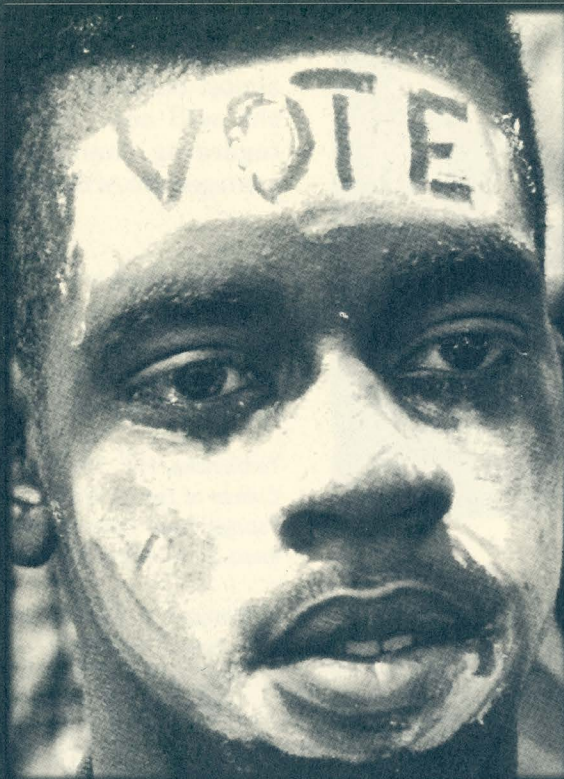




*Graphic Agitation: Social and Political Graphics since the Sixties*

by Liz McQuiston.

1993. London: Phaidon, 240 pp., hard cover, illustrated, R170.

Reviewed by Jeanne van Eeden

There is no shortage of books dealing with the history of posters and graphics in general, but *Graphic Agitation* uses a thematic orientation

that specifically examines the iconic significance of graphic design during the last three decades.

The book examines a wide range of graphics that have been used for propaganda and protest since the 1960s. The unifying theme of the book is power, with its related aspects of power struggles and the creation of 'awareness' politics. Apart from exploring 'the part that graphics can play in expressing... struggles' (p 7), more importantly perhaps *Graphic Agitation* also looks at the creation of visual languages, including the role played by the media and technology. The author stresses that her point of departure is not necessarily a purely historical survey of the subject, but that the influence of design-related aspects such as format and medium are given equal prominence. McQuiston shows how the use of new participative formats have added to the popularisation and wider dissemination of graphics, enhancing their propaganda potential.

*Graphic Agitation* includes two introductory sections which sketch the context of the period covered in the book and outline the history of propaganda and protest in graphic design. The rest of the book consists of an examination of five main themes: national politics; global issues; alternative lifestyles and liberation movements; health and welfare; and ecology. Whereas the topics treated in the first chapter are generally traditional political issues (in which South African concerns are given due coverage), the second chapter focuses on more humanitarian aspects such as nuclear disarmament, Amnesty International and famine.

The third chapter deals with women's rights, the sexual revolution, gay liberation and black liberation, in which the anti-establishment slant of alternative lifestyles is stressed. The chapter dealing with health and welfare naturally concentrates on contemporary issues such as drug abuse and AIDS, while the last chapter is concerned with ecology and the green movement. It is specifically these last three chapters that contain some of the most up-to-date, relevant and interesting information.

The text is copiously illustrated, almost exclusively in colour, providing very good reference material. The inclusion of examples of graphic design by artists such as Jenny Holzer is enlightening, as these examples are not often represented in art historical journals. The typography of *Graphic Agitation* is unfortunately not very satisfactory. The type is in general too small, especially for the captions, and this detracts from the usability of the book.

The text is well-researched and lucid, though the omission of footnotes is regrettable. McQuiston argues her case admirably and provides a good, critical overview of the topic which fills many gaps often untouched by more traditional publications. She also touches on questions such as censorship and provides a starting-point for further debate on the power of the graphic image. This book is highly recommended for art and design students, cultural historians and general readers.