



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Shepard Fairey,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Shepard Fairey on February 10, 2011. The interview was in Los Angeles conducted by Anne Louise Bayly Berman for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. This is a rough transcription that may include typographical errors.

Interview

ANNE LOUISE BAYLY BERMAN: This is Annie Lou Bayly Berman on February 10, 2011, interviewing Shepard Fairey at his studio, Studio Number One, at 1331 West Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles.

So we can get started talking, I guess, about Charleston. So you were born -- coming up, right? February?

SHEPARD FAIREY: Fifteenth, 1970.

MS. BERMAN: Okay. And what was the environment you grew up in? You were just saying Charleston is pretty small. But, you know --

MR. FAIREY: Yes. Charleston is pretty small. I think -- my parents always said it was 80,000 people; it might be more now. It is small, but South Carolina is very small, and Charleston is one of the bigger towns. I think Columbia might be a similar population. But I had no idea, when I was a kid, that Charleston was really unique. But it is unique, because it was an early port, and it expanded to -- it's a peninsula, it expanded to its natural borders early on. So almost all the houses are from between 1750 and 1850.

And I -- you know, I had no frame of reference, but it's a pretty conservative place. A lot of the families have been there since plantations, and are still very socially, you know, dominant. And so, my parents -- my mom was born in Alabama and -- Mobile, Alabama. My dad was born in Rock Hills, South Carolina, and grew up in Rock Hill. My mom moved to Rock Hill, South Carolina, where her father was then the president of Winthrop University, and that is where my parents met, in Rock Hill, which -- Rock Hill is even smaller than Charleston. It's, like, 40,000 people.

And then, my parents got married very young. They're the only serious relationship either have ever had. And they got married when they were 19. And they moved to Charleston for my dad to go to medical school. My mom started in the late -- mid to late 1960s, and my mom started teaching high school English. And she was only, you know, three or four years older than some of her students. At the time she taught to help put my dad through medical school.

So -- and you know, in high school my mom was head cheerleader and my dad was captain of the football team. In --

MS. BERMAN: So [inaudible] --

MR. FAIREY: Yes. In 1973, Redwood Magazine did a story on the All-American Southern family, on our family, the --

MS. BERMAN: You're kidding.

MR. FAIREY: -- stay-at-home mom, boy who was three, girl who is one, and father who is, you know, a doctor.

So, you know, I think my upbringing was very sort of, you know, Andy Griffith, small-town, Norman Rockwell. But you know, from the time I was little, I was -- I got into drawing, I think, when I was around four, is really when I remember getting excited about it. And I loved to -- it's funny that I am really into peace imagery, a lot of anti-war imagery now, because then it was burning buildings and fire trucks, aircraft carriers, bombers, tanks. I loved anything that seemed, you know, exciting. Explosions and guns, I loved all that stuff.

But my dad can draw a little bit. He got into drawing with me when I was a kid. And I think I was just like any other kid, you know, drawing was for indoors on rainy days or whatever, and the rest of the time I would rather be, you know, outside, running around. I had a lot of energy. And I was always a little bit mischievous. I loved throwing magnolia pods and berries and anything I could get my hands on at people, cars, whatever.

You know, I wouldn't say I was super-bad, I just was, you know --

MS. BERMAN: Typical.

MR. FAIREY: You know, I enjoyed --

MS. BERMAN: Kid.

MR. FAIREY: I enjoyed hide and seek and jumping out from behind things and scaring people. Mischief, you know, I was always mischievous.

But I went to a kindergarten where -- that was run by the church we went to. Then, for first grade, I started going to Porter-Gaud. And that's the same school that Stephen Colbert went to.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, you're kidding. And how do you spell that?

MR. FAIREY: P-O-R-T-E-R-G-A-U-D.

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. FAIREY: And Porter-Gaud is a -- used to be a military school, all boys, and then it became both genders, I think, in around 1970. And I think probably still to this day has a disproportionate number of boys. The South is slow to evolve, you know?

But the -- Porter-Gaud was -- I had no idea, but really it was all probably the most affluent and smartest kids in Charleston. And, you know, my parents, we never had the kind of money that a lot of other people had, but my parents always wanted to make sure that, you know, that I got the best education, and that they could -- you know, even if they didn't own a plantation, they could hold their own, I guess.

But that school was good and bad, in that it was very strict about all the academics. It had a very intensive spelling and grammar and writing emphasis. And I think that that was great for me. But by the time I was in -- in seventh grade, in middle school, you had to start wearing a coat and tie to school every day.

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. FAIREY: So that happens in seventh grade. That is also around the time you start noticing the opposite sex a little bit, and Porter-Gaud being about 65 percent guys or more, I started to feel like I couldn't express myself creatively with my wardrobe, I wasn't as big a jock, because I had been hit by a car -- I was a jock when I was a kid. And, actually, I am really grateful that when I was 11 I got hit by a car, because I had been the captain of the soccer team the year before that, and was -- you know, was just really into soccer, and sort of derived a lot of self-esteem from being good at something that is -- you don't really have to work that hard at it. It's like if you're naturally athletic, you're going to be good at it.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. FAIREY: And then I got hit by a car when I was 11, and it was a -- it broke my leg and set me back, athletically, and so --

MS. BERMAN: That's terrifying.

MR. FAIREY: Yes, yes. And I still have -- I had 70 stitches, I still have the scar from it. It was a hit and run thing, a guy running a light. And I was on my bike, zooming to go play football with some friends a few days after Christmas in 1981. And the -- that happening set me back athletically, and made me realize -- I don't think in such a -- maybe such a sociological or anthropological -- you know, with any depth, that a lot of social hierarchies, you know, established early on with, like, athletic prowess and things like that.

MS. BERMAN: Right, right.

MR. FAIREY: But I got that it is definitely not as fun to not be the best one on the soccer team.

So, in 1983 I got into skateboarding, because it was something that you could do that was -- there was no compulsory component to it. You just go and do what you want to do, and you can either do it by yourself, or you can hang out with a group of people. But you don't have to be part of some sort of organized sports thing. And there is a lot of creativity to it.

And I think the thing about -- I had always been into art, and I was really into drawing. But all the drawing and painting that I did, sort of emulating what I thought you were supposed to do as an artist, which was paint still life, seascapes, architectural renderings, things like that -- and I think that, technically, I got really good at drawing and painting -- I mean for my age.

And -- but when I got into skateboarding, I got my first good skateboard for my 14th birthday, so February 15, 1984. It's funny that it was 1984, you know, since --

MS. BERMAN: Exactly.

MR. FAIREY: -- Orwell has become a big theme in my work.

MS. BERMAN: Absolutely.

MR. FAIREY: But the -- all of a sudden, where I -- you know, I had enjoyed drawing as -- and painting as this isolated thing, and I enjoyed being athletic as its own thing, and I enjoyed, you know, some sort of rebellious mischief, but those are all disparate things. When I got into skateboarding, it all kind of came together, and -- because skateboarding at that time was really an underground culture. It was very, very much influenced by the do-it-yourself ethos of punk rock. And with punk rock came all, you know, the homemade tee shirts, and skateboarding promoted itself with homemade stickers, and there was a lot of converge between the methodology of skateboard brands promoting themselves and bands promoting themselves.

And, you know, all the sudden I -- there was a creative outlet physically and artistically in skateboard culture for me that -- you know, I don't think I thought about it that way, that like, "Oh, wow, now the master plan is coming together," or anything like that, but it was very satisfying, as a whole package.

And that was when I started making homemade stencils. And, you know, at first, making stencils was just a way to make skateboard logos or images of bands that I liked. But I also had drawn a lot of pictures of people, and started to say, "Oh, well, I like the Sex Pistols. I will do a portrait of Sid Vicious," or, "I like the Clash, I will do a portrait of Mike Jones from the Clash." So, even back then in -- starting, you know, end of 1984 into 1985, making stencils using this sort of reductive approach to create something that could be both iconic and translate as a one-color spray paint stencil or simple screen print started to become a -- you know, a part of my art process.

And yet, at the same time, I was still taking more traditional art classes, rendering with pencil and painting. And especially in South Carolina, it's not very -- I didn't even know what Pop Art was until probably, like, 1986 or 1987. You know, it's very traditional. South Carolina is -- almost all the art is geared toward reinforcing these stereotypes of the South that appeal to tourists and -- you know, or my dad used to always say, you know, "If you get lucky, one day you will get to paint the duck stamp."

You know, my dad is really into duck hunting and quail hunting, and --

MS. BERMAN: Sure.

MR. FAIREY: He would love to go -- sometimes at the mall they would have a display of some of the originals of the duck stamps or the quail stamps, and he loved that. And I might sound like I am --

MS. BERMAN: But it sounds like he was supportive of your work.

MR. FAIREY: Oh, yes, yes. They were. They were supportive of my art. And my dad used to draw with me. But he is really competitive, and so am I. But, you know, I didn't recognize it as that then. But the moment I got to where I could draw as well as he could draw, or better than he could draw, he stopped drawing with me. And that was probably around the time I was 10.

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. FAIREY: But I remember, you know, he would teach me how to draw stuff, and I -- you know, I would imitate how he drew things. I would ask him how did he draw an airplane, and he would do it, and then I would imitate it.

And then, you know, and then I would look at some picture of an airplane and make my own addition to it. And I think that he saw that I was really into, you know, this process of translating what I saw into something, you know, that -- two-dimensional that represented it. And that observation -- I think that he saw that -- you know, when he drew it would sort of be, "Here are the basic shapes of it," and that's how it -- you know, that represents an airplane. But then I was like, "Oh," you know, every little detail of some insignia on a wing.

For a long time I think it was -- you know, all of my strength as an artist came out of not technical ability, that I have some sort of fluid great mark-making ability, but that I would observe and translate very, very meticulously. And I still think that I am that way. But a lot of times it is meticulously simplifying something down to what gives it its essence, rather than putting everything in it.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. FAIREY: But I went through this process of, you know, basically wanting to draw photographically, or paint photorealistically -- not photographically, but photorealistically.

MS. BERMAN: Right, right.

MR. FAIREY: But anyway --

MS. BERMAN: And so was this school -- you went through high school?

MR. FAIREY: I went to Porter-Gaud until -- I left after my freshman year, actually. So two years of skateboarding at Porter-Gaud, and no girlfriends that went to Porter-Gaud, and I decided I couldn't take it there any more. I didn't want to be at a school that was all privileged white kids and no girls that were interested in me and no -- I had a couple friends that, when I started skateboarding, were into it. But they were all sort of very insecure and trend-oriented. So, once they decided that skateboarding wasn't cool any more, they then started to make fun of me because I was still into it. And where -- I'd never been passionate about something to the degree I was about skateboarding. So if that had happened about any other trend I was into -- hand-held video games or, you know, whatever -- I would have just abandoned it in order to fit in. But this was something I wasn't going to give up.

So I remember, you know, sort of having this show-down with some of my friends and saying, like, "You know what? There is nothing wrong with skateboarding, you guys just don't like it because five jocks said it wasn't cool, and you know, you're too scared to disagree with them. And I'm going to go to Wando [ph] -- and I remember Wando was a public school -- and they all wrote in my yearbook, "Yeah, go to Wando and join the punk club. Real cool." You know, and they made fun of me. And -- but, you know, I actually am still friends with some of them. You know, when you're that age, you get over stuff real quick.

MS. BERMAN: Yes, just sort of --

MR. FAIREY: But --

MS. BERMAN: -- what being that age is like, I guess.

MR. FAIREY: Yeah. But, anyway, so when I went to public school, the art program was really shitty at the public school. But the one good thing that came out of it was that -- I'm a type I diabetic, and I have an insulin pump, but anyway --

MS. BERMAN: Do you need to --

MR. FAIREY: No, no, I'm good. The one thing that came -- good thing that came out of going to the public school, art-wise, was that they had screen-printing equipment in the back that -- or, like, just a screen and some inks and stuff. It was all very primitive, but no one was using it. And so a friend and I, you know, said, "We want to use this stuff, we want to make homemade tee shirts." And I had done stuff with spray paint stencils before that, but screen printing looked more professional and -- which is funny, because now everybody is like, "I want my digital graphics to look more street, more punk, more edgy."

MS. BERMAN: Yes.

MR. FAIREY: But -- so, you know, he made a hand-cut Bob Marley stencil, and I made a Sid Vicious Sex Pistols one, and then it was just the beginning of me obsessively cutting stencils and doing -- and making screen-printed tee shirts, you know, pretty much every week at that public school.

But the one thing that I, you know, didn't mention from Porter-Gaud was that I had had a couple teachers there that were really supportive of my art career, and they even created this art award for me, just to have some way of saying, "You're doing good stuff, you're working hard at it." So --

MS. BERMAN: That's great for a student.

MR. FAIREY: Yeah, it's cool. So -- and the funny thing was -- it was at, you know, assembly, which she did one day a week. They always gave that out. And that was where the whole school went into the auditorium. And a lot of times I just bailed on it, I didn't go, because they didn't take attendance. But for whatever reason, that week I happened to see my parents were at the school, and I had no -- as everyone is filing towards assembly, and I thought, "Maybe I'd better go to assembly," and then they just spring it on me, that I'm winning this art award.

MS. BERMAN: [Inaudible.]

MR. FAIREY: And how embarrassing would it have been if I -- you know, if I had, like, just ducked out and not gone and then they were like, "Shepard Fairey, Meda Morris Grimbly [ph] Art Award," and then I wasn't there.

But anyway, the summer after my freshman year, which was the summer between when I left Porter-Gaud and started going to Wando, my teachers, my art teachers from Porter-Gaud, organized a group to go to Italy and look at all the different amazing historic works in Italy, you know, everything from, you know, the Last Supper to the Sistine Chapel and, you know, tons of churches and all sorts of -- statue of David, all that stuff. And it was -- you know, that was a really great experience. And I think it made me -- you know, it made me think about sort of art has historically significant in a way I hadn't prior to that.

But anyway, the good thing about once I went to Wando was that Wando was a lot more socially diverse. There were a lot of different kinds of kids there. But my parents hated it. They thought -- I wasn't getting good grades, I was getting all, you know, Bs and Cs. And they felt like I was stagnating. So during the summers I would go to this -- the summer after my sophomore year I went to the North Carolina School of the Arts summer program, and that was a really great sort of intense art program. And then I went back again the summer after my junior year and my parents said, you know, "You know, you need to apply to go there your senior year. We don't want you going back to Wando."

So, I did that, and I got in. But then, while I was there for the summer program, I also ended up sneaking out to hang out with this girl, and getting caught for sneaking out after curfew and being kicked out. And the crazy thing was the girl didn't get kicked out. And what it turned out, politically, was that they wanted to convince her to go there, and they wanted to give my spot away to get her to go there.

[They laugh.]

MR. FAIREY: But -- how ironic, huh? She didn't end up going there, but they were courting her big-time to go there.

And so, I got kicked out. So with about a month-and-a-half until school was supposed to start, my parents took me to a professional guidance counselor who would figure out what was wrong with me, and where I should go to school.

You know, my dad picked me up in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and a six-hour drive back to Charleston. He didn't say one word to me the whole drive, except for right when he picked me up, he said, "You know, you've got a problem. I need to see whether you're actually a sociopath," you know. And I didn't really understand what that meant. But when I found out that it meant that -- somebody that lies compulsively and can't distinguish a lie from the truth, I thought, you know, "When I signed out on that sign-out sheet and changed p.m. to a.m. so that I could stay out all night, and then they figured out that little twist, I knew exactly what I was doing." You know, I think there was nothing that was a reflection of me being a sociopath there. But anyway, my dad was just trying to -- he was trying to hurt me.

But he -- they took me to this guidance counselor, and they found a school for me in California in Idyllwild, and --

MS. BERMAN: What school is that?

MR. FAIREY: Idyllwild School of Music and the Arts.

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. FAIREY: And so I ended up going there. And that was actually a great program. The cool thing about Idyllwild was you did academic classes in the morning, and then you went to -- at noon, your academic classes were -- it was kind of a paired-down program. And then at noon you went to lunch, and then did art classes until 4:00. And so, I took photography, painting, and drawing. And then -- one semester. And then the next semester I took, like, a graphic design class. I think they called it two-dimensional design, or something like that.

But I had really great teachers. And there were students -- a lot of students were from L.A., but there were people from all over. And we took trips into LA. We went to the MoCA. We went to this big art fair that was a contemporary art fair, and there were galleries from all over the world. And there were Warhols and Barbara Krugers and Chuck Close and all these amazing artists in -- you know, in this art fair.

And also, just coincidentally, when I went to that art fair, there was a poster campaign by an artist named Robbie Conal of Ronald Reagan painted unflatteringly with the word "Contra" above and "Diction" below. And that was -- yeah, that would have been 1987. So, of course, when the Iran Contragate thing was going on. And those posters were all around on the street, posted on electrical boxes.

And I liked that approach to art-making, because punk rock, you know, the Clash, the Dead Kennedys, Black Flag, the Circle Jerks, a lot of these bands had a political point of view, there was a lot of anti-Reagan, question authority, question U.S. foreign policy. And I -- you know, I was inspired by that, and I -- you know, I got a sticker from, like, you know, a hippie news stand in Charleston that said, "Stop the arms race, not the human race," and

I put it on our car, and my dad was really bummed out about that.

But I never really integrated any of that, any of the politics or that kind of energy from the punk rock into my visual art. And I saw -- you know, I saw Robbie Conal's work. I loved that it was in public. I loved that it was clearly, you know, a fine art painting that you could -- was irrefutably art, and yet it had a political point of view, a point to make, and, you know, and a sense of humor, all in one thing. And, you know, that was inspiring.

The following year I applied to the Rhode Island School of Design. I got into RISD, and the following year I had a class -- I don't remember which class it was, but -- for -- inspired by Robbie Conal's work, I wrote a paper --

MS. BERMAN: This was at RISD?

MR. FAIREY: This was while I was at RISD, during freshman foundation, when you haven't declared your major yet. But I was -- I had a feeling I would go into illustration, because it was an open-ended major, and I was -- it gave you a lot of flexibility to take electives. But I also -- drawing and painting were what I was pretty good at, and I'd done -- I enjoyed photography, I had done a lot of photography my senior year in high school, but I felt that photography, in and of itself, was too limiting, and I started to get into photo-silk-screening. But, you know, I knew that if I studied photography, I would probably be limited to making photographic images on photo paper.

But, anyway, when I was at RISD freshman year, I had to write a paper for a class, and I decided to write it about propaganda that was what I considered positive propaganda, or propaganda with a social conscience. And my point was that propaganda art is really powerful, and people fear it because they think that it has a sinister and manipulative agenda, but making art that has a point of view that's about correcting social ills and abuses of power, that's great -- that's good propaganda.

And so, I based that paper on my -- being inspired by Robbie Conal and then doing some research and discovering a lot of work from, you know, around the time of the Works Progress Administration, you know, through, you know, the Vietnam War. There were a lot of great posters around the Vietnam War, you know, up through Robbie's work. And that was really how I became more familiar with Barbara Kruger's work. And, you know, writing this paper was the first time I really organized my thoughts about how I thought art should work conceptually, not just aesthetically, that it's -- you know, the role of art is larger than just "I made something that looks good over your couch and it's pretty and it's soothing," and it's about personal catharsis for the artist, and sort of therapy, or whatever.

But, you know, a lot of artists think that that's totally fine, and I am not trying to, you know, dismiss their opinion of how art should work. But I guess I started to feel this -- that there was a bigger goal with art, and I didn't know how what I was doing as an artist would work with that, but the seeds were planted.

And the summer after my freshman year was when I created the Andre the Giant has a Posse sticker. And to give a little context of that, I was working at a -- well, my parents wanted me to come home to South Carolina for the summer if I couldn't find a job in Providence. And I kept looking for a job in Providence, and people kept saying, "Oh, yeah, there's this one video store, they need help," and then I'd go there and they'd say, "No, we're good," and I kept putting it off and, you know, getting something solid. And finally, the end of the year came around and I still didn't have a job set up. But I lied to my parents and said that I had this video store job, and decided, well, you know, I can live pretty lean. I'll figure it out.

MS. BERMAN: That's really lean.

MR. FAIREY: I'll figure it out.

MS. BERMAN: Right, right.

MR. FAIREY: And, you know, my parents -- I didn't -- you know, my parents paid my rent, but I didn't have any sort of allowance subsidy, except for I got \$100 a month for the utilities. And so, I had worked as a-- during that summer I -- oh, that was -- yeah, I decided I would hit up the school, and I got a job working as a monitor in the silk screen studio, and I had no idea how to do it. I'd never done photo emulsion silk screening. But that was when it started. I showed up an hour before I was supposed to start the job. I lied and said I could do it, and asked the monitor, "Please show me how to do this stuff, so that I can -- I'm actually competent in doing this job," and he showed --

MS. BERMAN: So it was like a crash course in learning how to --

MR. FAIREY: Right, a crash course in -- I knew about silk screening, so I wasn't, you know, completely unqualified. But I didn't know how to do photo silk screening. So he showed me how to coat and shoot a screen, and then how to reclaim a screen and degrease a screen. And that took about an hour. And then that was something that I think I did -- I think I did that one day a week, they only had it available one day a week.

And I also -- the other thing I was doing was I was making homemade tee shirts of band logos and things I wanted to make for myself anyway, but printing three extra ones on, you know, on white undershirts. And I would go down to Thayer Street, which was the kind of -- it was like the Melrose of Providence, kind of, you know, the hip shopping district. And they had a lot of record stores and cafes and the skate shop, where I was always buying my stuff, and I was on the skate team there. And I would sit on the sidewalk, and I would sell some tee shirts. And that was -- there was no brisk sales there. I was lucky if I sold one or two shirts in a day. And so, between that job and my one-day screen printing job, that wasn't going to work out.

But luckily, I was hanging out in the Watershed, the skate shop, a lot. And the guy who worked there was a total stoner and was always leaving and not taking good care of the store, and his uncle was the owner. They had another store an hour away. Well, one day he left and said, "Can you watch the store for me for a while, while I go pick up a bag of weed," or whatever. And I stayed there. And this actually happened several times, where he would just let me run the store while he was gone.

Well, his uncle shows up and says, "Hey, where is Billy?" And -- have you ever been to Providence? It's hilarious.

MS. BERMAN: Yes.

MR. FAIREY: But anyway, I'm like, "He had to run an errand, I'm just taking over the store for a while," and he's like, "I call here a lot. No one answers the phone. I think I'm going to fire him. Do you want a job?"

And so, I got Billy's job --

MS. BERMAN: Get out.

MR. FAIREY: -- at the Watershed. I wasn't trying to steal his job, but that's -- you know, he didn't really deserve to have it anyway.

And so, this was the ideal arrangement. Because when I started working at the Watershed, I wanted to get a discount on skate equipment. I was already running the skate team there. I -- they asked me to do logos for the skate shop team -- and the team, Team Shed, which -- I loved doing that stuff. And if business was slow, I could sit there and cut stencils.

MS. BERMAN: Ideal situation.

MR. FAIREY: Yeah. So I did that. And one night a friend, who hung out in the shop all the time -- this guy who used to be a professional skateboarder, Eric Pupecki, who wasn't pro yet -- he -- I was hanging out at my house, working on tee shirts and cutting stencils, and he said -- I didn't even have a TV, you know, I didn't watch TV at all then. And he said, "You know, I'm bored. I want to learn how to make a stencil."

And I said, "All right, you know, let me find something for you to practice on." So I looked through the newspaper, saw this ad for wrestling with Andre the Giant, and said, "Oh, this is funny. Why don't you make a stencil of Andre the Giant?" He was like, "No way, that's stupid." I said, "What are you talking about? Team Shed is over. Andre's posse is going to take over."

We were all listening to a lot of punk rock, but also hip-hop had started to become the new punk rock. So, as sort of edgy white guys were appropriating the slang of black culture, using the word "posse" all the time -- we didn't say "our friends," "our crew," we always said, "Yeah, we're rolling out with the posse." And so that's where "Andre the Giant Has a Posse" came from.

But Eric said, "That's stupid." And there was this very strong clique mentality that I was just sort of intuitively reacting against by making fun of it, saying to him, "Hey, man, you know, Andre's posse is the new posse. Team Shed is played out. Too many people know about it. Andre's posse is going to be the new shit." And so, I sort of enrolled him in this idea very quickly of making a stencil of this thing as practice, and that it would be our inside joke, and when people asked us about it we'd say, "Sorry, the posse is top secret. If you don't know what the deal is, you know, we can't tell you."

And so he tried to cut the stencil, got really frustrated. By then I felt like there was enough energy invested in it where I should finish it and, you know, I cut it out, wrote, "Andre the Giant Has a Posse, 7'4" 520 lb," and took it to the copy place and gritted out a bunch of them on a sheet and ran off some stickers and cut them up, and thought it would be an inside joke with a few skateboarder friends.

But quickly what happened was exactly like I had theorized. People were like, "What? What's this new thing? Yeah, Team Shed, I already know about that, but what's this new, even more exclusive thing?"

MS. BERMAN: Right, right.

MR. FAIREY: And so, you know, I was fascinated by that.

MS. BERMAN: And were those mostly at the -- like, right at that time, skater people and other friends who were --

MR. FAIREY: Yeah, it was friends from school and --

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. FAIREY: But mostly the skater crowd.

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. FAIREY: And, you know, I thought that it would just be a very, very short-lived joke. And what ended up happening was that, you know, you give a few stickers to friends, and then, you know, somebody sticks one on a baseball cap, and all of a sudden it's like an apparel item. Then I decided, "Oh, well, I'll hand-cut a stencil for a tee shirt, too." And I did. I made, like, five tee shirts for the five friends that hung out at the Watershed.

But I started sticking the stickers around at skate spots and on stop signs. And I think, you know, I made, at the most, a few hundred of the stickers. But Providence isn't that big. So if you're tuned in to the stickers that bands make, and the Dada art stickers that RISD students were making, all of a sudden there is this new thing in the mix.

And I think at the end of that summer I had been fascinated by, you know, how many people were like, "Hey, hey, I heard you have that Andre sticker, can I get some of those?" And it was like a secret handshake. And then the local free paper, you know, called The Nice Paper -- it was, you know, the indie paper -- they ran this contest saying, "Whoever can tell us what the Andre the Giant Has a Posse sticker campaign is about gets free tickets to the Living Room show of your choice." And the Living Room was the cool punk venue where I had seen, you know, Bad Brains and the Ramones and Jane's Addiction and Suicidal Tendencies and the Circle Jerks, and all this awesome music. And I was like, wow, you know.

They printed the image in the paper that has -- I looked in the front. I was like, "What's the circulation of this thing?" Circulation 15,000. I had probably made 1,000 stickers total by then. I was like, "I can't believe this. If you just harness the power of the media, you can spread your message so much further, so much more quickly."

And then, you know, this idea of the coup of creating something from nothing by turning perceived power into actual power, that you find an audience and then, all of a sudden, you have a platform. You know, and I loved the -- that they want to know what does it mean. And so I thought about the Rorschach test qualities of this sticker that is -- you know, this blobby black and white sticker that some people were saying -- I heard a couple arguing about what it was in the grocery store, you know, somebody -- the guy -- the girl was saying to the guy, "Yeah, what is this thing?" And the guy says, "I think it's a band," and then the girl says, "No, I think it has something to do with skateboarding." And the guy says, "It's a band. I've heard their songs before." And it's like you get the whole gender politics thing encapsulated in that quick conversation. Like the guy has always got to be right, you know. He's totally willing to lie about having heard the music.

But just -- you know, people want to know what it is. And then I -- then that led to me thinking about images in public space, and how people don't question the images in public space because they're usually advertising. And there is not enough, you know, in public space that is really about achieving a sense of wonder, of excitement, of sort of renewed perspective or analysis.

And so then -- you know, I'd been a fan of the Sex Pistols since I was 14. But I did a little bit of research about them. And they were -- Malcolm McLaren, their manager, and Jamie Reid, their graphic artist, were really into Situationism. And they talked about Situationism as, you know, people have become -- they're in a -- you know, they're sleepwalking, they're in a trance, they become numb to their surroundings, and they need unusual spectacles to revitalize their perception.

And then I read about [Martin] Heidegger, and Heidegger's theory of phenomenology, you know, the -- similar concept, the idea that people have become numb to their surroundings, they need experiences that reawaken a sense of wonder and help them not look at -- accept things in the abstract, but actually look in a focused way and an analytical way at things around them.

And I thought, well, this sticker campaign, it was just a really goofy joke, you know, sort of about absurdity. And yet it's raising some issues that I actually think are fairly profound. So, I -- you know, I really started to think, well, I should take this really far. But I was also scared to put anything into it that I thought would undermine maybe the naive approachability of it, that the moment it seemed too intellectual it would be a turn-off to --

MS. BERMAN: Like it was almost too contrived.

MR. FAIREY: It would be -- yeah, it would be contrived. And the beauty of the Andre image was that the -- no one feels intimidated reacting to that image. Because wrestling is seen as the lowest brow culture. And you know -- but yet, still, I was astonished to see some people write things on the stickers -- and this was long before I started introducing red into my pallet -- like Nazi shit on -- or "Get this out of this neighborhood," "Cult."

MS. BERMAN: So people that were -- really, even from the very beginning --

MR. FAIREY: Even --

MS. BERMAN: -- really looking to attribute meaning to it.

MR. FAIREY: Attribute meaning to it and, frequently, the most paranoid interpretations I could imagine. This -- you know, the Simpsons had the joke on their show, "I don't understand it, so I'm going to have to kill it." That --

MS. BERMAN: That was the sort of attitude.

MR. FAIREY: Yeah. And I was fascinated by that.

MS. BERMAN: It's so funny, because one of the -- one of my favorite quotes from Supply and Demand [Supply and Demand: The Art of Shepard Fairey. Kevin Taylor; Ginko Press, 2006] was one from Kevin Taylor, who said in his essay that it was obnoxious, mysterious, hilarious, creative, ridiculous, and still, somehow, incredibly thought-provoking, which I thought sort of was a great quote.

And then there was one other person -- not to keep quoting people from the book -- someone else said there was almost like a lovingness to it. So it's so funny that so many people are attributing, you know, something really sinister and horrible to this image, where other people are seeing it, you know -- especially you -- as, like, you know, this -- something that is absurd and funny, and totally benign.

MR. FAIREY: Right. Well, the -- you know, since I've been living with that image for 20 years. I don't think I was thinking about it quite this way at the time, but I quickly started -- I wondered why this thing -- you know, before the Internet was on sort of a -- originally on a local level in Providence, and then eventually on a national level -- was becoming this viral phenomenon, like a punk rock chain letter, and what qualities did it have, and I -- it's that latitude for interpretation, but -- that I think is, you know, unlike a completely personality-free ink blot.

Andre, both in his life and in this image, has this interesting balance between sinister and goofy, triumphant and tragic. And you know, he had a disease, which would have been a set-back, you know, and he died young from the disease -- I think acromegalia, is that the way -- or acromegaly, or -- yeah. But, anyway, it's a disproportionate growth hormones different parts of the body that made him so large. And -- but he turned that into, you know, something he could benefit from, with his wrestling career. But everyone -- and yet he always played the big villain, as a wrestler. But a lot of people that -- in interviews, or people that have said he was a really, really nice guy. And I always looked at him as unattractive in sort of a sad, goofy way, a pathetic way. Other people think that he is scary. He's scary.

But it's that balance between all those things that I think made the image appealing, which was also why I was so frightened to tamper with the formula. But the more that I saw -- and so I think maybe that's also why it was provocative to people, because it wasn't easy to categorize. And, you know, the -- and it had this do-it-yourself sort of punk rock spirit, so it didn't seem to embody any of the usual slickness of how wrestling marketing was done. It was clearly not from that, you know, and this -- and who are the posse? So, all of a sudden, you know, there is this thing about a larger group that you want to know about.

MS. BERMAN: [Inaudible.]

MR. FAIREY: So I -- and I think all of that, you know, converged in a way that was very fortunate for me. But --

MS. BERMAN: So your understanding, I guess, or your thoughts about public space and about, you know, the message and whether it was humor or just getting people to kind of look, you know, the enjoyment you could get just from looking at something --

MR. FAIREY: Right.

MS. BERMAN: -- you know, like, "Wow, that water tower was really boring," you know, or that stop sign, or something, those things weren't there at the outset. That was something that really kind of -- you sort of were formulating these ideas as you continued the sticker campaign.

MR. FAIREY: Yes. It -- you know, it started off small in Providence, and -- but it became very well-known in the

underground in Providence so quickly that I felt -- I was amazed, and I felt very empowered by that, because, you know, I think the world can feel very vast and intimidating. And it's easy to feel anonymous and -- you know, in the world. And I think just that -- at people's basic core there is a desire to have your existence validated. It's just inherent in, you know, in everyone, and it manifests in different ways.

You know, for me, I loved -- if I saw somebody wearing one of the punk rock shirts that I had made out somewhere, I was so excited about that. It's like there is physical proof that something I made mattered to someone.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. FAIREY: And, you know, I don't want this to come across as like it was all about my ego, but I think that ego drives a lot of what we do. And so, you know, I also -- I think originally, just the idea of the mischief of making something absurd, pervasive, and the ego of wanting to see some evidence of my existence proliferating, that was it. But then it started to make me think about these other issues.

And that happened very quickly, because I was able to get the stickers spread around Providence in such a short amount of time. I mean I rode around Providence on the bus and on my skateboard, and yet still, people were saying, "Your sticker's, like, everywhere. It's on every stop sign, it's at every club I go to," and --

MS. BERMAN: That's a huge impact so quickly.

MR. FAIREY: Yeah, yeah. And so then, you know, I -- the following summer, I got a car. And I started to drive to Boston and put stickers up. And I drove to New York and put stickers up. And --

MS. BERMAN: And were you still doing just the smaller -- like the sticker [inaudible] --

MR. FAIREY: Yeah, I was just doing the, like, 3 x 3 --

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. FAIREY: -- "Andre the Giant Has a Posse" --

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. FAIREY: -- stickers at that -- you know, but I did -- in 1990, another really big thing that happened, one of the things that really made me realize the power of images in public space was -- of course, it was easy to do a sticker campaign, because it's inexpensive, and it's simple to put stickers in your pocket and go out and put them up. But that reaches an audience that will tune in to that kind of communication. And occasionally, somebody that was maybe a little more square, for lack of a better word, would say, "Oh, yeah, you know, I've seen that Andre thing."

It would happen -- sometimes it would -- one thing that was really fascinating was people's ability to block out any peripheral visual noise that had nothing to do with their agenda. They almost, like -- it's a mechanism for keeping people focused on what is important to them, that it -- naturally, you would get distracted too easily if you tuned in to everything around you, so stay on task.

But the way I realized this was because sometimes a friend -- I would be out with a friend, and they would have a friend I didn't know there, and the person would say, "Hey, yeah, this is Shepard, he's the guy who does those Andre stickers," and the friend would be like, "Oh, yeah, I don't know anything about that." Then I'd pull a sticker out of my pocket and show it to him, and then I'd see them, you know, six weeks later, and they'd say, "Oh, my God, you've been going crazy with those stickers." I'd say, "Well, the stickers were all already there, it's just that now you're -- you've -- it's registered for you."

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. FAIREY: And so now it's unavoidable. Once it's registered, then you see it everywhere. And I was fascinated by that, how that -- you know, that worked with people, as well, and I decided, well, if I go larger scale, it's going to enter into, you know, a different tier of consciousness. You know, it's more difficult to avoid, a different kind of person that doesn't just tune in to cool, punk rock underground stuff, or skateboard stuff. They will see it, they will engage with it.

And so, there was a billboard for Buddy Cianci running for mayor in Providence.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, yeah, this is one of my favorite things from your book.

MR. FAIREY: And I had an illustration class called "Editorial Illustration." And the very first class we -- the teacher

passed around a hat full of fortune cookies, and said, you know, "Pick a fortune cookie, and you have to illustrate what it says on your fortune cookie." Well, I already wanted to change the Cianci billboard around, because it was right by campus, it was a low billboard, and it had a picture of him just standing there, waving. It said, "Cianci: He never stopped caring about Providence." And I thought it was a silly billboard, it was meaningless, it said nothing.

And I wanted to do this prank, I was -- wanted to sort of step up the scale of what I was doing with the Andre stuff. But my fortune cookie insert said, "To affect the quality of the day is no small achievement." So I thought, well, I'm going to make a bunch of people laugh, that's how I'm going to affect the quality of the day. And I'm going to make people think about how completely meaningless this billboard is. I'm going to hijack it.

So, I made an eight-foot-tall Andre head, and changed it so that -- made a little sign to go in Cianci's hand, so he was holding a sign that said, "Join the Posse," and I put "7' 4" 520 lb," Andre's height and weight on his lapel, and made it say, "Andre never stopped caring about Providence." And I -- you know, I did that billboard, and all of a sudden it was on the news, it was in the newspaper. Everybody at school that knew me was saying, like, "Let me buy you a beer, man."

I had no idea that doing a prank like that would really get so much attention. And I was excited and actually scared by that a little bit, because I had been able to do my thing without much concern about whether I would ever get in trouble for it. And because of that billboard, the cops started sniffing around the school. The school did some inquiries. And then, all of a sudden, one day my portfolio containing a bunch of uncut sheets of Andre stickers that was outside the dining hall where everybody left their portfolios when they went in to go to lunch was missing. And then I get a call from the security office saying, "We found your portfolio, abandoned outside of the dining hall. Can you come up to have a meeting with us about it?" And they were snooping around my stuff, looking for evidence, and they were like --

MS. BERMAN: And was this really the first time that you got feedback from the university on your work?

MR. FAIREY: Yeah.

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. FAIREY: Yeah. This was the first time I got feedback from RISD.

So, there were -- they said, "Yeah, you know, well, we've talked to some people. They say you did the billboard," and, "What did we find in your portfolio?" And they seemed, like, so excited to have me under the hot lamp, you know, and I gave them, I think, very little satisfaction of, "No, no, it wasn't me. Okay, it was me." No, I just said, right away, "Yeah, I did the billboard," you know, "I did it as a prank, and for one of my illustration classes."

Oh, and by the way, I documented -- I photographed the billboard, and put in some of the newspaper stuff and put the Andre image and the Cianci image side by side, and turned that in as my solution to the illustration assignment. And my teacher said, "Would anyone in the class be able to make a case for this not being an A for the assignment?"

MS. BERMAN: Wow. That's amazing.

MR. FAIREY: Yeah. And, apparently -- Fred Lynch was the name of the teacher -- I think he still teaches there, or he did until recently, because it's like every year somebody tells me, "I was taking Fred Lynch's class, and he told the story of your Andre billboard the first day of class."

MS. BERMAN: That's so great.

MR. FAIREY: Yeah.

MS. BERMAN: That's amazing.

MR. FAIREY: And so -- but anyway, the school said, "Well, obviously, this is -- it's expensive to fix a billboard, and they know -- it's right by RISD, the city assumes it's a RISD student. You have to turn yourself in."

So, I said, "Well, yeah, how much does it cost to fix a billboard?" And they said, "Well, it's about \$2,000." And to me, that would have -- that could have been, you know -- that seemed like \$5 million to me. That was just so unimaginable, that amount of money.

MS. BERMAN: Yeah.

MR. FAIREY: And so, I turned myself in, they said, "Well, we'll have to see if Cianci wants to press charges." Cianci, luckily, had a history of being a hothead, and needed opportunities to show his cool, measured reaction

to things.

MS. BERMAN: I like it.

MR. FAIREY: And so, Cianci did a press release saying, "I'm not going to press charges against this kid, I don't want to interrupt his education. I'm going to have him do a project for inner city kids, teaching them art." And then the school said, "Well, now you got to go talk to Cianci about what project you're going to do."

So I went and I met with him, and he said, "I don't know, I haven't really thought about it that much. Here is my number. I'll think about it, give me a call." He clearly did not care at all whether I actually followed through and did the project. It was just that, "Look at Cianci, what a level-headed problem-solver."

MS. BERMAN: Right, right, right, right.

MR. FAIREY: And so, I actually didn't call him, and the school didn't bug me about it, and -- yeah, that was that. I never did the public service project.

MS. BERMAN: But you went back -- didn't you go back and change the sign, or the billboard, on multiple occasions [inaudible] --

MR. FAIREY: Yeah, I actually changed it -- they had Cianci smaller on the billboard, and the type a little bit smaller. And one of the -- you know, once again, this is a good example of how something seeming possible motivated me to try it, and then -- because it was a low billboard, and the image of him was small, I was like, "That's doable. I can go to Kinko's, and I can run off a four-foot Andre head, and I can get up there and do it."

So I actually got up there and did that right in broad daylight one day, and changed it around. Well, two days later, before my class -- before I'd even photographed it, and two days later, before my -- two days before my class met, I -- they changed the billboard back to the way it was, but made it way bigger. And so that's when I happened to go back and do the second one --

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. FAIREY: -- with the eight-and-a-half-foot head.

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. FAIREY: But if it had been the eight-and-a-half-foot head to start, I never would have done it. I would have said, "Oh, that's just too complicated an undertaking."

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. FAIREY: But, you know, once you make these break-throughs, you realize it's possible. Then, you know, they sort of upped the ante. But I was like, well, it was really quick and easy to do that. I think I can --

MS. BERMAN: The door was open.

MR. FAIREY: I can figure out how to do the bigger one. And also now, you know, it's on. They got -- so I have to -- I got to make sure it's done right before the class meets.

And so, that was -- yeah. So I did it twice.

MS. BERMAN: But -- so that was before, then, you met with him, and all of that.

MR. FAIREY: Yeah, that was before I met with him.

MS. BERMAN: And so, did this really get you hooked on doing larger -- I mean did that sort of -- you know, the light bulb turn on and you're like, "All right, now I can start going out and doing, like, larger posters in addition to the stickers"?

MR. FAIREY: Yeah. That was the first step to me wanting to do larger posters. And I also had started to make some stencils, spray-paint stencils of the image, that were a little bit bigger, about, you know, 11 x 17 or so. And the -- I remember one of the campaigns that I -- I decided, after TheNice Paper thing that, you know, getting their attention, and then they spread the image on, you know, 15,000 copies of The Nice Paper, that trying to create that phenomenon was a good way to go. You know, it would make -- increase the awareness of the image.

So, there was a radio station called B101 in Providence, and they had a bee flying through the air with his hand

out as -- a caricature of a bee, like a cartoon -- as their logo. And they had bus stop shelters and billboards. And so, the next thing I did was I decided I'd make oversized copies and I'd put them on the B101 billboards as close as possible to the bee, like, holding the sticker, and on their bus stop ads. And then, I was hoping that they would say, you know, even if it was just sort of a crime stoppers thing, they would say on the air, "And someone has been tampering with a lot of our advertising materials with Andre and the Giant Has a Posse thing, and you know, and in a sense -- in trying to figure out, to get to the bottom of the problem, they would be helping me.

MS. BERMAN: Right, right, yes.

MR. FAIREY: And, you know, that was fun to do. It never actually worked. They never said anything about it. But some people did see the images on -- I did a couple of the billboards that were off the freeway and, you know, some of the bus stops. But the bus stop things were really easy to clean, they would clean them really quickly. But that was the kind of thinking.

And, you know, poor B101, I shouldn't have victimized them. But you know, at that time I was sort of like advertising is -- you know, a lot of it's an eyesore, and it's put in the public space without any -- you have no say whether it can be there or not. If it's paid for, you have to look at it. And yet, in other public spaces where you're a taxpayer -- theoretically we all own the public space -- you can't put something up because that's going to be vandalism.

And, you know, I felt like, in some ways, advertising was, you know, visual vandalism. And, you know, if it wasn't literal destruction of property, it was insertion of an eyesore in an unappealing way, and that there had to be a consistency. You had to either tolerate street art and tolerate advertising, or not tolerate either one. And so that's how I sort of, in a juvenile way, justified intervening with advertisements, in advertisements.

And later on in 1994 I sabotaged this "OK Soda" campaign, this thing that Coke was doing that was kind of an appropriation of underground comics and underground music aesthetics. Dan Clowes, who did Ghost World and Eight Ball, he did some of the graphics for it. But the thing that made me mad -- I drink Diet Coke all the time, and I did then, too -- but it was that Coke was trying to appropriate and exploit a culture that I thought had a -- you know, an underground authenticity, and they were seeing that, because of Nirvana and Pearl Jam and grunge, that all of a sudden it had this commercial viability that they would exploit.

So, you know, anyway, I -- yeah, I started doing some bigger images, and I started going to New York a lot, too, which was the thing that started happening. Summer 1990 I went. Following year, my friend -- my best friend from South Carolina -- John, started going to NYU, and I had a place to go and crash in New York. And Boston and New York became the places that -- where the next challenge to make the Andre images seen widely. And --

MS. BERMAN: And was it actually more challenging for you to get images -- I mean, obviously, you have to drive there -- but in terms of accessing space and not getting caught, and all that kind of stuff, was it harder? Or having it cleaned off right away.

MR. FAIREY: You know, New York -- the great thing about New York was that it was dirty. And stickers and stencils stayed up so long in New York. I got to -- Boston, on the other hand, cleaned stuff a bit more quickly. But stuff stayed up there, too.

And, you know, the way I tried to integrate my work into the public space was I would put stencils on lamp bases and I would put stickers on the backs of signs or on crosswalk boxes. But I tried to do it in a way that was not so antagonistic. I wouldn't cover up type on public signs, I wouldn't put stuff on storefronts, where someone would be like, "Oh, you know, our pristine storefront has been vandalized." I tried to put the work up in a way that it -- you know, it was visible, but it would ruffle feathers as little as possible.

And in Boston that seemed to work, as a strategy, largely because street art wasn't really very pervasive. So, you know, you get to that tipping point a lot of times. Now that street art is popular, where you put a sticker on something and then all of a sudden five more people put a sticker, and if it had stayed at one sticker, no one would have cared, but all of a sudden people go, "The weeds are getting too high, we've got to -- oh, my God, we've got to do something about this." And so it gets to that tipping point, where it's time to clean it.

And when I was -- in the early 1990s, when I was putting a lot of stuff up in Boston, I think, even though Boston is now pretty vigilant about cleaning stuff, because that kind of culture is more popular now, I think it was -- you know, it was unassuming enough at the time. New York, on the other hand, you know, it seemed like everything I put up would stay. It was more likely to be covered up by more stickers or more stencils than it was likely to be cleaned. And, you know, that's changed since then.

But the cool thing about New York is that, because everyone walks around, you just walk around lower Manhattan, you can make a big impact. And I -- my friend and I, you know, would explore, and I would keep a stencil and some oversized stickers in my messenger bag, and eventually would bring glue and big posters. But,

you know, with just the basic materials, it could just be part of the course of our day. We're going to go play pool, go see a band, go to a bar, go to -- he worked at a recording studio -- go to the recording studio. And we're going to walk anyway. Along the way, I'm just going to put stuff up. And --

MS. BERMAN: Which makes it easy, rather than having to have your work, like, a separate solitary studio time --

MR. FAIREY: Yeah.

MS. BERMAN: It's -- was so much a part of your life, I guess.

MR. FAIREY: Yeah. And you know, the thing -- just on a -- I think it's important for me to mention -- chronologically, on both a technical and conceptual side, my time at RISD, my sophomore year I really started -- which was when I started my illustration major -- I started making a lot of images that were based on the concepts of questioning authority, freedom of speech. There was a big flag-burning controversy going on then.

There -- I really -- I was fascinated by a lot of the stencils and things I would see around, you know, "The government has blood on its hands," "An AIDS death every eight minutes," or whatever, this sort of -- you know, art as activism was something that I was more focusing on. And screen printing, technically I was getting better as a screen printer.

So, I went to Boston and photographed some -- you know, some protests there about -- I think it was about discrimination against, like, union workers or, like, service employees. That's hilarious, that at the time it was more the -- I was much more concerned about the feeling of these types of movements than actual content. But I went and I photographed this protest and, you know, the cops standing in front of their cop cars, trying to intimidate. And I made some images of that, and I did some stuff of -- I was starting to work with collage.

I was starting to accept that, you know, what Andy Warhol did or Robert Rauschenberg did, that they're combining their sensibility with pre-existing imagery frequently. That was perfectly valid, that there was nothing more valid about redrawing an image than doing some other manipulation that made it your own and more powerful, that the pure technical skill of rendering was meaningless, unless it yielded the most powerful result.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. FAIREY: And so, that's what I -- you know, I was doing in school. And the funny thing was I had no idea how that kind of work that I was doing for my classes and to make some homemade tee shirts would then end up really converging with what I was doing with Andre, because, at the time, I was so scared to tamper with Andre aesthetically, that it -- you know, I just looked at it as this goofy, you know, Rorschach test-like absurd sticker campaign that had implications, but I could never have anything, you know, overtly political about it, much less didactic about it, or else that would ruin it.

MS. BERMAN: And when people asked you straight out, "What is the meaning of this," or -- I mean, not close friends, but, you know, someone who saw the sticker or something -- what would be your response?

MR. FAIREY: "What do you think it means?"

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. FAIREY: And --

MS. BERMAN: And what would they say?

MR. FAIREY: Well, eventually -- people would say all sorts of different things. One guy, who, when I was putting a poster up on the back of a sign in Providence, walked up with, you know, a couple of big-haired Guido girls under each arm and said, "Hey, what's that all about? I seen that around."

You know, and I said, "Well, what do you think it's about?" And he said, "You're the one that's doing it, you know what it's about," and I said, "Well, I mean, what if I told you I'm just being paid to put this up? I mean what would you think it was about?" And he said, "You know what it's about. Tell me." And I said --

MS. BERMAN: Oh, my God.

MR. FAIREY: I said, "Well, you know, what do you think about advertising? Do you think there is any brainwashing, when people see images around?" And being asked these questions that he didn't know how to answer in front of two ladies, it was emasculating, I think, in some way. And so, he comes up and pushes me. He wants to start a fight with me. And he -- sticking his finger in my chest, "You're the one that's fucking brainwashed."

MS. BERMAN: Oh, my God.

MR. FAIREY: And then, like, grabs the girls and is like, "Yeah, let's get out of here," you know. And people do not like to be put on the spot about how to interpret things. And that's the failure of a lot of art to engage a broader audience, is that people feel like they don't have the art credentials to interpret the work, which is, in many ways, from my experiences with the Andre sticker, something that I have been aware of, and tried to make sure that I made my work in, you know, in a lot of ways, as, you know, as clear in its communication as possible, and as unintimidating, as democratic as possible. That might sound contradictory when I made this sticker that's sort of designed to be meaningless and open to interpretation. But still, it's unintimidating subject matter.

But, anyway, you know, I was -- it was 1993 when I eventually saw the movie, *They Live* Do you know that movie? Do you know about that movie?

MS. BERMAN: I know of the movie.

MR. FAIREY: And I'd been a fan of Barbara Kruger's work, like I said, and -- do you know her work?

MS. BERMAN: Mm-hmm, yeah.

MR. FAIREY: They live -- the set design, I think, was largely inspired by Barbara Kruger. It uses all -- not black, white, and red, like she uses, but black and white, but Futura Bold type, and sometimes italicized, which is what she frequently does.

And I saw this movie, and it's about a guy who is sort of the Everyman down on his luck, blue collar guy. And, you know, I think that the premise of the film was that the middle class is shrinking, and all the people with the power want to keep the working class under their thumb. And, you know, in the film, Rowdy Roddy Piper -- ironically, you know, played by -- or serendipitously, played by another wrestler -- is the protagonist. And he gets work at a -- you know, at this benevolent sort of quasi-religious organization doing construction work. And the leader -- looks like Ray Charles, and he wears these sunglasses -- and all of a sudden the riot cops come and tear apart this, you know, sort of benevolent Communist spiritual compound that is never really clearly defined. And Rowdy Roddy Piper goes and sniffs through the rubble and finds -- or the wreckage -- and finds these sunglasses, and puts them on. And when he has the sunglasses on, all the advertisements say things like, "Consume," "Sleep," "Watch Television," "Obey." And then, he looks at certain people, the cops, the -- you know, the wealthy people, and they're aliens. But they've figured out how to assimilate and look like people.

But, you know, I just thought this was a really great metaphor for how a lot of people follow the path of least resistance, and there are a lot of forces out there that really benefit from controlling people, but in insidious ways, where they don't realize they are submitting to this control. And, you know, the word "Obey" was just so glaringly offensive to me, I always hated to be told what to do, always wanted to make my own decisions, and I decided that I wanted to use that word in conjunction with the Andre campaign, that I was ready to sort of step out of just using the image.

And I had already made a few images that were ripping off of pop culture, but mostly just hijacking or piggybacking things that I thought were fun and cool, like Andre with a Jimi Hendrix afro, Andre with the Kiss make-up, Andre in the space helmet of the Neil Armstrong first moon landing, "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind," things like that.

And, you know, the idea was that wrestling is not taken seriously, but if Andre is inserted into these other things that already have sort of cultural validity and relevance, that that's part of the coup of establishing Andre as an icon, you know, which later -- you know, I think in 1995 I did the Andre Warhol, and it was the Marilyn hair and make-up on Andre the Giant.

MS. BERMAN: Right, right.

MR. FAIREY: And predating Mr. Brainwash and Bansky by a good bit. And, you know, the funny thing about that was it's easy to make a beautiful sex symbol an appealing icon. But it seems impossible and ridiculous to try to make Andre appealing. Yet that coup of making Andre an accepted and pervasive part of culture was -- you know, was something I was going for. And everyone seemed to love it when that was subversive. But then, when it actually kind of manifested, then I was a sell-out. But anyway, you know --

MS. BERMAN: And what -- and I guess, by the point also, bootleg images had started showing up. So --

MR. FAIREY: Yeah.

MS. BERMAN: -- what was kind of your reaction and other people's reaction to that?

MR. FAIREY: Well, because, you know, this was an art school phenomenon, and everybody at art school has the,

theoretically, the wherewithal to make their own sticker, there were -- you know, there were stickers that showed up at -- from RISD that were knock-offs and one that even -- that was kind of trying to take a swipe at me made by these guys -- I had this group of friends that were -- just happened to be a bunch of cute girls, and I was dating one of them. And then we all -- they were all into skateboarding and punk rock, sort of -- you know, they were what I think was the coolest group of girls, who also happened to be cute. And I hung out with them a lot.

And these guys made a sticker that took my RISD -- they called the -- like the picture book of everyone, the mug shot book -- they took my RISD mug shot. And my first name is Frank, it's Frank Shepard Fairey. But only people that -- who were trying to dis me would call me Frank. So they did an "Andre the Giant Has a Posse" formula, but it said, "Frank the Stud has a Posse Bunch o Girls, Y'all," and that was -- also, with "Bunch o Girls, Y'all," they're making fun of me being from the South, and hip hoppers say, "Yes, yes, y'all." So kind of clever, you know.

MS. BERMAN: Right, right.

MR. FAIREY: And then I wrote my manifesto, which -- you were asking about how I would respond to people about what it meant. So instead of defining it as meaning something, I just talked about the -- you know, the psychological aspects of the phenomenon I had witnessed, or the sociological aspects I had witnessed, and I cited Heidegger, and I talked about, you know, people wanting mementos, and the trend psychology, and I wrote that. And that was -- I originally wrote it for a class that was a class -- and I don't -- it was originally a six-page paper. And the one --

MS. BERMAN: Wow.

MR. FAIREY: The one page pared-down version that I still have was because I didn't think people had the attention spans -- if they just asked me, like, "What is it about," and I could pull out of a folder a one-pager --

MS. BERMAN: Right, right.

MR. FAIREY: -- and give it to them. I wrote it for a class that was about how design -- it was an architecture class, but you didn't have to be an architecture major to take it. But it was called, "Dwelling Place and Environment," and it's about -- it was about how art design in architecture affects where you live. And that -- where you live could be your home or your city. So I talked about how I had put this piece of illustration in the context of the city, trying to affect things, and wrote it for that class. And then I made the pared-down version.

And then I -- you know, it was 1990. And one thing that I'm proud of is that when I read that thing now, I think all the phenomena I talk about not only were accurate, but have played themselves out in a much grander way than I ever could have predicted when I wrote that.

Part of the effect of something becoming a reference point is that people make -- like, you know, they make a "Bunch of Chics Y'all" sticker or any other thing -- bands started putting, like, you know, their band logo and so-and-so has a posse, and there was a guy -- this guy had this thing -- his name was Paul, and he did a thing called "Paul's Planet," and he went and painted inside the record stores, and he made stickers. But then, you know, somebody made a sticker that said, like, "Paul's Planet has a bigger posse," sort of like art rivalry.

But I was always very excited by those parodies, because the parodies just give more power to the original. And any time somebody saw a parody and they didn't know what it was referencing, and they're like, "What does this mean," and somebody says, "Don't you know that Andre the Giant thing," and, you know, that sort of thing has happened to me plenty of times.

You know, The Clash's "London Calling" cover is a parody of Elvis's first cover. But I didn't know that until after I was into The Clash. And then, you know, you find things and it makes you go and look at what the historical relevance of it is, why it's a reference point, and you know, I think that has a lot of power. So I was excited by that.

MS. BERMAN: Wow. Well, what happened when you shifted from the one image to -- the original image to the next?

MR. FAIREY: Oh, one other thing I should mention is that the other reason that I created the manifesto was because I had decided that I could only go so far driving to different cities and putting stickers up myself, but a lot of people from RISD would say, "Let me get some stickers, I'm going to mail them to my friend at this other school."

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. FAIREY: And some people even said, "Can I get a proof sheet to run my own stickers off?"

So, I decided that I would start advertising in some of the punk and skate magazines, just -- I remember the first ad that I made, which I think was in 1991, that went into Flip Side, a punk magazine, was a picture of Elvis, and it said "Big" underneath it, and then a picture of my Andre, and it said, "Giant," underneath it. And it said, "For stickers and the low down, send a self-addressed stamped envelope." And --

MS. BERMAN: How many people did?

MR. FAIREY: Oh, I started getting -- I was amazed. My RISD PO box, which was the address, I started getting, like, six, eight letters a day. And --

MS. BERMAN: Wow.

MR. FAIREY: -- I couldn't believe that. I mean now, when I think about how much traffic my website gets, I'm like, "Heh, six people."

MS. BERMAN: That's a lot.

MR. FAIREY: But that was a lot. And so, what I did was, you know, I made -- also made the paired-down manifesto, so that I could fold that up and put that in the envelope, put a Xeroxed proof sheet in the envelope, so if people want to run their own stickers off, and I would put, like, 10 or 15 stickers in there. I hadn't figured out the weight, what, you know, a \$.23-cent stamp would get me, and I would send that back out.

And then, you know, later on I realized that it was really time consuming, cutting all these stickers and sending out the manifesto and all that. So I'd say, "Send a dollar," you know, and then -- but you would still -- compared to -- normally, one sticker is a dollar at a skate shop, so --

MS. BERMAN: Right, right.

MR. FAIREY: You know, what people were getting was, you know, far more valuable than what they would normally get.

And, you know, my idea was that once people read the manifesto, and they felt like they had sort of, you know, an understanding of how the viral phenomenon was supposed to or could work -- they had the proof sheet -- that, you know, a certain number of people would feel like it was a -- something cool to get down with and perpetuate, and other people would, at least, just stick the stickers somewhere. And --

MS. BERMAN: So that's another really democratic element, I mean, to it also is that you're letting other people put up your work, you know? So they're really having, like, a hand in it.

MR. FAIREY: Yeah, yeah. And I -- you know, I loved -- I still love the idea of in -- you know, in a world where you feel like the corporations and the government are so monolithic and oppressive, the idea of an individual on, you know, the thinnest of shoestring budgets could make something that, you know, actually got noticed, to me, whether you thought it was a stupid idea or not -- in fact, maybe, as a viewer, you would feel more motivated because it was so stupid. Like, "Oh, my God, this totally dumb thing is out there, you know, I have to get out there," you know.

When people have said to me -- I joke around -- when people have said to me, "You seem very motivated, you seem like you have a really strong work ethic, where does that come from," and I say, "Well, with the immense piles of mediocrity out there, I can't just sit around idle; I must add my mediocrity to it."

MS. BERMAN: That's a good way to -- I like that answer. What's the reaction to that?

MR. FAIREY: Well, you know, some people laugh and some people say, "Stop making more visual pollution. Just stop." They just want me to stop.

But anyway, the -- so, yeah, there was this democratic component of it. But I made the transition to -- I started to make the transition to using other images in -- you know, around, like, 1991, 1992, but that was all that pop culture stuff. And then, in 1994, I did the OK Soda campaign thing, which -- where I went in and I made reproductions of the OK ads, but with Andre the Giant. It said, AG, instead of OK. And I put those over their ads in the subway in Boston, and I put them up on the street. Providence and Boston were two of the cities they were test marketing it in. I made stickers.

And then, I made -- shortly after that, I'd say -- yeah, it was end of 1994 or beginning of 1995 I made -- no, it was actually -- I think it was 1994, because it was around the same time I made the OK stuff, which was the end of 1994. So I made Andre's head just with OBEY underneath it, in the same type style that I still use. And that

was -- you know, that was inspired by They Live, and -- which was inspired by Barbara Kruger.

And then, later, I evolved that to cropping in on Andre's face so that it felt a little bit more Big Brotherish, using the red bar, like Barbara Kruger does, and saying, you know -- and knocking OBEY out in white.

And then, I became -- I had become really fascinated with Russian Constructivist propaganda. And I was already going in this direction that felt very much like, you know, a counter-cultural version of Fascist propaganda or, you know, Orwellian propaganda. And I -- you know, I decided that I wanted to make something that was really harmless, benevolent, look sinister and scary, to get people to question it with the -- you know, by making my work look more propaganda-like and using the word OBEY, with the intention of when -- of getting people to then -- by, you know, by proximity, seeing this thing out in the public context, say, "Okay, maybe I should question other things I see in public." And I also had just fallen in love with the aesthetics of a lot of propaganda, but especially Russian Constructivism, the stuff that came out late teens, early to late 1920s in Russia. Very, very beautiful integration of design, typography, and iconic illustration.

And also, I was trying to figure out how to make more posters cheaper. And I didn't want the posters to be just black and white Xeroxes, but I couldn't afford to screen print everything, because it's time consuming and expensive. So I figured out that the machines at Kinko's, which I knew how to rig with a paper clip to give out free copies, where you didn't have to put a copy card in, had a red toner cartridge and a black toner cartridge. So I decided everything I was going to design needed to be black, white, and red, and I could make a separation, just like you would for a screen, a black -- you know, a black master that was for the black, and then a black master that was for the red, run the red one through with the red cartridge button pressed, and it would spit out the red layer, and then run all the copies back through for the black.

And so, it was like doing a two-color screen print, but on a Xerox machine. And so, you know, my budget, in a lot of ways, was dictating my aesthetic. And -- but I also -- it was a direction I wanted to go in. So, initially, that was what propelled the evolution of the image from just the black and white full head to the cropped in with the red bar.

And then I said, "You know what? If I want to have a cohesive, Constructivist aesthetic, or propaganda aesthetic, I need to make the face less grainy and more of a streamlined icon." And so, it was at the very end of 1995 and into early 1996 that I was working on the images that I actually still use as the main icons, which was the icon face that's the simple symmetrical face. Some versions have the OBEY beneath, some versions are just that and a rectangle, the version where it's kind of like a film strip, the top of the head, the middle of the face, and the bottom of the face, but each one cropped in. And then that same face, but cropped into the shape of a star.

And those -- that was a real break-through period for me, in terms of design. I didn't know how to use the computer. I was doing all this stuff by hand, but I was using a Rubylith and a Xerox machine, just like I -- I still use Rubylith. This is -- you know, I hand-cut these illustrations out of this material called Rubylith. Yeah, this one is called "Wipe Out."

MS. BERMAN: Wow, I like it.

MR. FAIREY: But, you know, this is all -- so it gets a really clean line. What happens, that's cut out with an Exacto knife. So it's two layers. It's a red layer --

MS. BERMAN: Oh, wow, okay.

MR. FAIREY: -- on top of clear acetate. So -- and I cut it out carefully with that. But, you know, I started to work on this much more iconic, simplified version of my work that, you know, that was very inspired by Russian or Soviet Constructivist propaganda. And, you know, initially I would use the arrows and the exclamation points and the stars, you know, as prominent elements in the design, not only because I liked that design, but because I knew that those were the signifiers that would terrify people.

MS. BERMAN: Yes.

MR. FAIREY: You know, because, oh, you know, there was -- you know, there was still residue from the McCarthy era, and all the other sort of periods of Communism, scares about Communism, that I thought was completely irrational and hilarious.

And so -- you know, and I also thought that it was so ironic that terrible products like, you know, McDonald's or Marlboro packaged in Americana were -- you know, you're so ingrained that people -- it would almost be like trying to deny your own DNA to say, you know, "That stuff is no good," yet it's terrible for you. And that's -- you know, that's how these brands work. I mean they -- Coke, with every single trend, has a new jingle or a new way of co-opting that trend where, if you don't like Coke, you just -- you're un-American, you know?

And so, I was -- you know, I was fascinated by that, and you know, wanted to do something that sort of made just how superficial that was apparent by doing something that was designed -- like I said, designed to be something completely harmless, packaged in a way that people would go, like, "Oh no, what is that," and, you know, and using the OBEY, trying to encourage people to question blind obedience by making, you know, this directive of OBEY overt, rather than covert, which is the way it frequently works when people are being manipulated.

[Audio break.]

MS. BERMAN: This is Annie Lou Bayly Berman on February 10, 2011 with Shepard Fairey. And this is the second disc.

So, we were just talking about your shift over to the different format of the Andre image.

MR. FAIREY: Yes, the more OBEY direction, yeah.

So, the -- at the end of 1995, beginning of 1996, my -- was when I was working on all those images that -- the three-face series vertical, there was another version that I had done that was the middle of the face, and then half of the face on either side, where the colors sort of reversed that was a -- I think a strong image. All of these were explorations in emulating Russian Constructivist propaganda, but really were helping me to understand how this kind of graphic design and minimal color palette worked.

And that was a really important evolution, both, I think, aesthetically in my work and conceptually, in that I had decided that the Andre face wasn't necessarily always going to be the dominant image. I had created Andre images that were now very functional, as icons that could be shrunk down or as a smaller part of the composition, a sort of logo to identify that it was my work, that it was part of the same campaign. But it didn't have to be the dominant image. And --

MS. BERMAN: So it really gave you more flexibility to broaden what you were doing, overall.

MR. FAIREY: Yeah, it did. And, you know, initially I think a lot of the work that I was making had kind of a -- you know, a comic kitsch side to it that, you know, it was designed to very obviously employ a lot of the devices, like I said, the exclamation points, and even things from historical Soviet posters that I would appropriate and incorporate into some of my pieces, whether it was a crowd with their fists up, or reillustrations of famous Stalin and Lenin images, or you know, I started to use some Chinese propaganda influence in Mao, and I also included a -- did a -- a little bit later I did a Nixon as part of the series of what I called the In Lesser Gods We Trust series.

But what a lot of people got intuitively was this was sort of employing propaganda aesthetics to question propaganda. Then other people thought, like, "Why is this guy trying to glorify Stalin?" You know? "He is responsible for a lot of genocide." And, of course, I wasn't -- it was a cautionary thing. But for a period of time, it was very much about the antagonism of those kinds of propaganda images, a series of AK47s flanking an OBEY star.

But I still was making images that talked about questioning authority and, you know, even if it was imperialist agenda from a Soviet perspective, but I felt that, you know, if I've got Stalin and Lenin saying -- with the power of industry and our influence, you know, our world influence, we will be giant, you know, and play on Andre the Giant, that how could someone not see that and question just what the U.S. has done, as imperialists, et cetera. You know, that, to me, was implied in the work. But some people didn't get it.

And, you know, eventually, not only did I feel like I was getting tired of doing work that was sort of a pastiche of a lot of Soviet stuff, but I also felt like I should maybe be more direct and more committal about certain issues. So, you know, I made an image of a riot cop and it says, "I'm going to kick your ass and get away with it." I made an image of a surveillance camera, you know, with sort of, "You are under surveillance." It was basically reworking the stickers that you see a lot of times on store windows or buildings that have surveillance system employed --

MS. BERMAN: And were you putting these images up in the same places, or --

MR. FAIREY: Yeah. I was putting -- I made -- my system was, every poster that I made, I would make at least 100 to put up on the street, and around 100 that I would theoretically sell. I didn't really sell many of them at the beginning, but I thought, "Well, you know, this is efficient." It was just like the same idea as when I made -- wanted to make a tee shirt for myself, and I would buy an underwear pack and make two extra ones to sell to friends. I'm going to make the ones to put up on the street, and then make some extra ones to sell.

And eventually, around -- it was interesting. 1996 I was really hitting New York hard with a lot of posters. And the -- oh, man. The Cooper-Hewitt asked me to donate some posters to be part of a show they were doing, and donate the posters, and I said, "You're going to have to buy them for \$20 each, that's how much they cost. I'm

broke."

MS. BERMAN: Wow.

MR. FAIREY: And they said, "Well, it's a really big honor. People usually donate the work. We're an arm of the Smithsonian." I said, "Yeah, well, I'm poor." So --

MS. BERMAN: Did they buy them?

MR. FAIREY: Yeah. They bought them. They bought six or eight prints for \$20 each. Oh, God, break the bank over there, you know?

MS. BERMAN: That's amazing. So -- and was this one of the earlier times? I mean I know you had shows coming out around that time, but was this one of the earlier times that -- at major museums?

MR. FAIREY: Yeah. And around that same time -- I think what -- there was a small gallery in New York called the Alleged Gallery. And this guy, Aaron Rose, ran it. And he did shows that were mostly people who did art for skateboards or album packages or street art.

My friend, Phil Frost, who is the guy that in 1994 taught me that, you know, it's better to put posters up with wallpaper paste from the hardware store, instead of just Elmer's Glue and water mixed together, he worked -- he showed at the Alleged Gallery, he worked at a -- the store the Beastie Boys co-owned called Extra Large, that sold street wear. He did street art and he did fine art. And there were a small group of people that sort of were part of that scene, and they all showed at the Alleged Gallery.

And then, later on, Aaron did a show with my friend, Carlo [McCormick] who first had gotten my work for a show of art based -- art that inspired street wear, and that show went to the Alleged Gallery, and that was the first time I was ever -- in 1994 -- that I was in a show. Carlo, the senior editor of Paper magazine -- he's written the -- written a lot of stuff for everybody from bands to Robert Williams -- introduction to his book. But he and Aaron co-curated a show at the Holly Solomon Gallery. And Holly Solomon was kind of a big deal. She had the gallery at the corner of Mercer and Houston. And, you know, that was at the end of 1995. And I had some work in that show, along with a bunch of other artists. And eventually, we were basically the core group that were in the Beautiful Losers [Beautiful Losers: Contemporary Art and Street Culture, 2005] museum show.

And Aaron also -- and that was a big deal, because a ton of people came out to that art show. And I had never -- I never thought that what I was doing would have a broader appeal, even though I had this fantasy that maybe, you know, it would get out there. But seeing Jim Jarmusch there, you know, and all sorts of people -- it was a very crowded opening -- I thought, wow, this is -- something is brewing here, this is pretty amazing.

And you know, I'm a fan of Velvet Underground and Warhol, and you know, this idea of sort of, you know, a moment in time when there was something exciting happening was kind of what it felt like then, that -- you know, it's still pretty underground, but there is something exciting happening. But, you know, I wasn't the only one that noticed that. The New Museum noticed it, they had Aaron curate a show. I ended up doing a window display for the New Museum on Broadway, which was kind of a funny concept. It was just a big Andre icon face glued to the outside of the window, but also glued perfectly in register on the inside of the window, so that if people ripped at it on the outside, it was also on the inside. And I had had this thing that I had always talked about called the inside-outside strategy, that --

MS. BERMAN: [Inaudible.]

MR. FAIREY: -- if you can't -- if the dominant power structure is not giving you access, and you can't achieve what you want to achieve, you work outside of it, do it yourself, you know, making your own system, work around the dominant system. But if you have the ability to infiltrate and change things from within, do that, as well. So I thought this was a very funny sort of --

MS. BERMAN: I like that.

MR. FAIREY: -- literal translation of that concept. And then, around then the Cooper-Hewitt got some posters from me. So, you know, I was really broke, but I was starting to see that what I was doing was getting a little traction. And I also thought -- this was all around 1996 -- I was thinking, well, maybe I should, you know, take it more seriously. And I don't mean take it more seriously like take a more orthodox approach to art, but think about why, you know, it's working, and focus on evolving the things that I think are good about my work, and you know, yeah, just being diligent.

MS. BERMAN: Right, right.

MR. FAIREY: So --

MS. BERMAN: And this is the time that the documentary came out that Helen Stickler did?

MR. FAIREY: Yeah. I mean I completely glossed over that. There is -- yeah. What happened at -- Helen Stickler went to RISD. And funny thing, I don't remember meeting her there, but apparently she knew that I was the most obsessive screen printer, and she had all these inks left over from her screen printing class, and she was graduating, and she was trying to get rid of stuff, and she was selling it out on this patio area. And -- in 1990. And I happened to walk by, and she hadn't had any bites, so she said, "Hey, you know, you're that guy that's, like, crazy about screen printing, I heard. Just take these inks." And so I got ink from her.

But then I didn't reconnect with her until 1994, and she had seen my manipulations of the OK campaign in Providence and thought it was really funny, and said, "You know what? Like, I've seen this stuff in New York, I've seen it around Providence, I think, you know, this is an interesting subject." And she came to me and said, you know, "I want to do a documentary about you," and it happened to be right around the time I was planning on doing some interventions in the subway and -- have you seen the film?

MS. BERMAN: Yeah, yeah.

MR. FAIREY: And in Boston. And so, you know, we all drove to Boston, and -- yeah, and Helen's film came out at the beginning of '95 [Andre the Giant Has a Posse]. We started filming it, I think, in October of 1994. And it got into Sundance, I think, a year or two later. And, you know, it did the festival circuit. But a lot of people became aware of what I was doing from this 17, 18-minute documentary that Helen did. And --

MS. BERMAN: I actually worked on a benefit film festival, and she had us screen it there, along with one other thing she did. But -- so --

MR. FAIREY: Was it the -- Stoked? [Stoked: The Rise and Fall of Gator, 2003] Was it the --

MS. BERMAN: No, it wasn't Stoked, it was something shorter, but I can't remember what it was.

MR. FAIREY: Queen Mercy?

MS. BERMAN: Oh, my gosh, why can't I remember? But it will come to me. But this was, like, '99 or 2000.

MR. FAIREY: Cool.

MS. BERMAN: But a lot of people, you're saying, this was their first introduction to your work?

MR. FAIREY: Yeah. You know, I mean that's the thing that -- people have maybe heard about the stickers or whatever, you know, but that -- when that film toured around, that was a really good thing, in terms of giving people a little back story and maybe -- I mean I hate to say intellectual justification, because it's not particularly intellectual, but I think a lot of times people, they feel hesitant to endorse something if they don't feel like they're an authority on it, or they think that, you know, it's been validated in some way. And I think that film gave people, you know, something to grab on to, in terms of however they wanted to spin their involvement.

MS. BERMAN: Right, right. So, was -- this all was really sort of bringing you, I guess, sort of -- really bringing you inside, you know, from having been outside on the street. It was sort of -- people were recognizing you more, it was more gallery shows, there were more museum shows, that kind of thing? I mean did you feel like that was happening?

MR. FAIREY: Yeah, around the mid-1990s some stuff like that started to happen, but I -- you know, I was still -- my -- when I got out of school, when I got out of RISD, my theory was that I would facilitate my street art hobby by screen printing for a living because, you know, there were people that would just call me up and say, "My band needs tee shirts," or -- every now and then it would be actually somebody cool, like Sonic Youth. But usually it was really lame stuff. And -- but that I could justify having a studio and the screen printing equipment to make my own work by doing contract screen printing.

And that did allow me, on a very minimal budget, to continue to --

MS. BERMAN: And this was called Alternate Graphics?

MR. FAIREY: Yeah.

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. FAIREY: Called Alternate Graphics, which -- I chose that name, because all -- very recently, the word "alternative," as a music category, had come. And AG was also the same initials as Andre the Giant.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. FAIREY: So, the -- and, you know, it sounds -- Alternate Graphics sounds sort of, you know, benign enough to be -- you could -- if somebody that wasn't interested in sub culture wanted to just get me to print tee shirts for their pizza shop, you know --

MS. BERMAN: They won't be scared off.

MR. FAIREY: -- Alternate Graphics was fine.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. FAIREY: Yeah, exactly. So, I -- you know, and street art was my passion. And in no way was transitioning to a gallery artist what I was interested in. But I was broke. And so, I made tee shirts of my graphics, and I sold those to some skate shops. And, you know, I thought that was probably the most likely way I'd achieve anything commercially viable. Because I never thought I was going to make it as an artist. But then, to get gallery shows and be validated and be able to possibly sell some work and just expose people more to what I was doing was just a part of the process of figuring out how to keep it going. I was just desperate to keep it going.

MS. BERMAN: Right. Okay --

MR. FAIREY: And you know, when people look now at my history and they're like, "Oh, yeah, that guy, you know, he's" -- whatever, "he's part of the evil system, and you know, he's got a successful design company and, you know, he's, like, gallery artist now," the thing that's so interesting to me about that is that they say it as if that's just a thing that -- you make that choice, and then it happens.

MS. BERMAN: Right, right.

MR. FAIREY: You make the choice that you're going to -- "You know what? I used to keep it real, but now I'm going to sell out and be successful at it." There -- unless you're a trust fund kid, there is this whole thing of survival that is a really, really --

MS. BERMAN: Right, right.

MR. FAIREY: -- really tall order, as an artist.

MS. BERMAN: Right, right --

MR. FAIREY: And --

MS. BERMAN: -- just feeding yourself and getting supplies. I mean --

MR. FAIREY: Yeah. And so, you know, I never looked at making tee shirts and selling them to a few friends in a few shops as I'm laying the groundwork for a very successful apparel line.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. FAIREY: Or that, you know, doing these art shows, one day that is going to lead to a museum, and that will mean that people will actually pay me to come lecture.

MS. BERMAN: Right, right. It's just --

MR. FAIREY: These --

MS. BERMAN: -- [inaudible] what you were doing.

MR. FAIREY: You know, these things seem not even possible, so I'm just -- let me make it through the next day, week, month.

MS. BERMAN: And was all of your printing pretty much at that point still the Andre image campaign? I mean I know you were also -- you know, you did other projects, the Hawaii -- I'm getting the sequence incorrect, but you know, like, the Hawaii project, and the collaboration with Glen E. Friedman, and your musicians projects, and all these sort of different projects, but at -- still in the mid-1990s-ish, were you still focusing mostly on this?

MR. FAIREY: Almost everything was focused on OBEY/GIANT.

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. FAIREY: And -- but I did make some tee shirts that were not OBEY or GIANT, because I needed to make stuff that I knew would sell. And so, this was when -- this -- you know, this is a period of time from the early 1990s through the late 1990s, when the entire skateboarding and street wear culture was based on appropriation and subversion of logos and pre-existing references. So, you know, when people now -- I'm sure you've probably read that, like, "Shepard Fairey: Plagiarist" thing that Mark Vallen did -- when you look at that work that mostly came out in the mid to late 1990s, the stuff that he is attacking, that stuff was actually -- yeah, it had big chunks of things that were, you know, appropriated or sampled, but compared to the music, skateboarding, and street wear culture that I had really grown out of, my stuff was, you know, far less lazy --

MS. BERMAN: Right. Well, it's also --

MR. FAIREY: This was all about -- it was about, "Screw you, I'm taking this stuff, and I'm subverting it" --

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. FAIREY: -- and -- so that was --

MS. BERMAN: And there is a lot of reference in those -- you know, in skateboarding and in punk -- and in --

MR. FAIREY: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. BERMAN: There is so much reference, and you're referencing other stuff to make a point, you know. So it's --

MR. FAIREY: Yeah. And so the graphics that I was making just for tee shirts, just to survive, were -- do you know the clothing line Jive, Refresh Jive? It was huge in the 1990s. It's still around, but they had made this -- instead of Tide, it said "Jive," but it was the Tide box. And then a bunch of other people started doing sort of detergent knock-offs. So I made one based on Ultra-Bold, but it said, "Ultra-Old, with Brain Softener," Logo Ripoff Formula. You know, and it was a logo ripoff formula making fun of logo ripoff formulas.

MS. BERMAN: Right, right.

MR. FAIREY: And I made another one that was the Lego logo, but it just said, "Logo," and underneath, in parentheses, "stolen," small. And instead of -- and on the back it had my AG, Alternate Graphics, logo, but it said "Appropriated Graphics" underneath it.

MS. BERMAN: That's really funny.

MR. FAIREY: And I made a lot of things like that. And those were all -- you know, they were just sort of fun explorations of and commentary on pop culture, critiquing and participating in a way that was, I think, self-deprecating, you know.

But, yeah, it was -- you know, it was really the late 1990s when I started -- I did do that period of Andre graphics where I was hijacking music and pop culture stuff. But then later it started to circle back to that when I started making a lot of different tributes to the Sex Pistols that had a blend of that punk and pop culture with the propaganda style, so that -- the way I looked at it was I'm not going to do everything that looks like Soviet propaganda, but people know that work of mine, they know that color palette, so I will show some continuity by having a certain facet or strand of what I'm known for there intersect with my love of Sex Pistols or punk or whatever kind of music, and have that inform that aesthetic, but have it also be, in some regards, reverent to the pure original thing and, you know, and blend the two.

And, you know, I guess, you know, this culture of remix that's like -- you know, I DJ, and I love the idea that people have a fondness for something in a certain context, and you remix it and they like it because of their existing fondness, but also love the way it's been reinterpreted.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. FAIREY: And so, that -- you know, that was something that I always -- you know, I was always excited by.

And, really, until -- I mean I still use references all the time. But until about the last five years, that was a big part of what I would do. But now I feel like I have sort of cruised through a lot of all my favorite influences, and now what I am, you know, trying to do is make things that I think are -- will resonate broadly, but without it being, you know, a literal remix of something, or perceived as usurping pre-existing value.

I get really irritated by that. Because, as an artist, the more successful you become, the more people want to try to discredit your approach. And you know, I was never -- I never tried to act highfalutin about my skills as an artist, or the originality of my concepts, or anything. The thing that I said was art should be more democratic, and I work really hard at pushing my work out there. And, you know, I'm not saying I invented the wheel at any

point.

But the -- you know, the conversation with the -- you know, the art world and the media and certain critics is, you know, the higher up the food chain you get, the more they want to, you know, control how you're perceived. It's really irritating to have to deal with that. But it also, you know, I think has also pushed me to evaluate how my work can evolve in a way that's most constructive in both achieving my goals and, you know, leaving little fodder for dismissal. So --

MS. BERMAN: Right, right.

MR. FAIREY: But anyway --

MS. BERMAN: But going --

MR. FAIREY: Yeah, but I mean -- I guess what I'm getting back to is, you know, my -- I mean one big theme in what I've done is it's always been a dialogue with the public, what I was doing. And, you know, that's evolved over the years.

But, you know, I always wanted to incorporate my influences and my history in what I was doing in a way that would turn -- you know, once people liked my work, if they don't -- cool, they like the Sex Pistols already, they say, "Oh, great, I love that image that's even more, because it's Shepard's reinterpretation," you know. I mean, I was fascinated by the story of Patty Hearst, but Raymond Pettibon, being one of my favorite artists, I would much rather have this image than, like, the -- you know, the picture of her with the gun in front of the SLA logo that's the more known photograph of it.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. FAIREY: You know, but -- you know, that's a cool image. His artwork is great. The two of them together, that's awesome.

You know, so I always liked the idea of things from history that inspired me being re-perpetuated by me and you know, brought to a new audience, a new generation. And, you know, I still try to do that. It's important to have this balance between not feeling like it's just about nostalgia, which I think can actually be really stifling, but it's about how certain periods of cultural evolution, revolution were -- are inspiring and can be looked at as a template for how one could do something that's appropriate to all the variables going on now.

MS. BERMAN: Right, right.

MR. FAIREY: And -- yeah. So that's -- you know, that's something that I am trying to do with my work, because there are a lot of things that I look at and I go, "Oh, you know," Bob Dylan or Neil Young or the Sex Pistols or The Clash, or Public Enemy, all these people that, you know, they built something from nothing. You know, or -- you know, Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks. There is -- on art and culture front or the political front, there is a lot of inspiring people out there that I think that -- you know, their actions in the face of adversity are motivating.

But -- so, doing art that -- whether it's portraiture of people, or incorporating references to stuff that I think has been cool and important, but doing it in a way that I think also has -- it also has new value and new relevance, is, you know, something that's important to me.

MS. BERMAN: So, were you -- did you have this point when you were working -- you were still dealing with -- I guess, you know, this is in the past 10 or 12 years -- you're still putting up the Andre posters and things like that, but then you were -- also had -- I mean did you feel that it was separate, these other sort of projects that you were doing? How did it --

MR. FAIREY: No. At a --

MS. BERMAN: -- all kind of work for you?

MR. FAIREY: At a certain point what I decided was that my style, and using, you know, obey small or the star logo or the icon face logo small meant that I could do whatever I wanted, and with those elements it would be part of the OBEY campaign, the OBEY campaign being, you know, a -- you know, a very malleable but, you know, loosely about do -- you know, empower yourself, question authority, question everything, do things your own way, that as long as what I was doing embodied that spirit, you know, you could have -- you know, I've got images that seem completely contradictory, images with AK-47s, and then images with, you know, flowers in the ends of guns that are pro-peace. They are actually coming from exactly the same point of view, but you know, I figure that the -- as long as certain things were consistent, that I could make any area of my interest more or less part of the OBEY campaign.

And it's -- because the OBEY campaign was an extension of my way of doing things and my philosophies, and some stuff was maybe more appropriate for the street and then other stuff was more appropriate, you know, as a tee shirt or as a poster I was going to show in a gallery, and you know, I tried to apply them accordingly.

MS. BERMAN: And was it -- I mean was it easy enough for you to do that, to be, like, all right, I can keep putting these out on the street, this I'm going to sell as a limited edition, put it up in a gallery, this is going to be an image I do, you know, on a clothing line collaboration or something? Did it -- I mean was it easy for you to kind of keep those things --

MR. FAIREY: Yeah, I mean it's a lot to juggle, the more all the different areas of my life have succeeded and things have gotten busier. Sometimes it's harder, but I've been really lucky that, for the most part, if I make a poster and I'm going to put it on the street, it will also work as a tee shirt and an art piece. Not always. Not always. But usually --

MS. BERMAN: What are some of them that you didn't think worked?

MR. FAIREY: Well, some of the portraits that are a little more moody and fussy with all -- a lot of the newer stuff, with more detail in it, I don't think works as a street art piece. There are older ones that I did really simple and iconic that did, I think, work as street art. There are images that I've made about -- you know, Aung San Suu Kyi is not necessarily going to work as a tee shirt for my clothing line, because it's not going to resonate, commercially.

There are things like -- I just did a -- I don't know if you saw the Second Amendment Solutions print that I did, but you know, I'm -- I wish there was more handgun control. And that's not going to -- they're never going to -- that's such a polarizing topic, my clothing line is never going to put that out on a tee shirt. And I -- you know, but we do a lot of things. You know, we did tee shirts for -- to raise money for Darfur, we've done tee shirts about cleaning up the oceans, we've done -- we have done tee shirts about political things. But some political things are just not going to work as part of my clothing line.

But, you know, the -- there still is a lot of overlap, and I'm very lucky that way, in that, you know, I am able to get my work out through a lot of different venues, to a lot of different people, without having to really change the approach too much. You know, there is a -- I might make something translate better to this tee shirt printing process, or I might simplify something for the street, where everyone is driving or walking by, and they need to absorb it quickly, it needs to communicate quickly, but there is still an efficiency to it.

And we joke around over at my studio, like you know, we waste no part of the buffalo. It's -- and, you know, I --

MS. BERMAN: And do you -- I mean going back even a little bit, you went -- you know, you had this Alternate Graphics business, that -- and then you had -- you moved to California, right, and you had BLK/MRKT --

MR. FAIREY: Yes, I --

MS. BERMAN: -- and then --

MR. FAIREY: Yeah. What happened was the screen printing business was not making enough money for me to keep doing all the posterizing and making the stickers and everything at the scale that I wanted. And yet, I had this fantasy that I would start selling more tee shirts of my own graphics to skate shops, and it would get more efficient and more successful. But before that was ever realized, I got too far into debt, and I just had to -- I had to sell all of my screen printing equipment and get a job.

And my friend, Andy -- but see, I'm stubborn, so I always want to do things my way. Luckily, my friend, Andy, who had been a pro skateboarder and entrepreneur -- he co-founded one of the most successful skateboard companies, Element, which had initially been called Underworld Element, and then just sort of -- to make it more palatable to the mainstream, they took "Underworld" off, but --

MS. BERMAN: [Inaudible.]

MR. FAIREY: -- he also had a clothing line called Sophisto, which had, you know, some graphics of, like -- you know, around 1992 it was Rodney King and the frame of him being beaten, and it said, you know, "In LA We Treat You Like a King," and you know, all these, you know -- two handguns and underneath it -- that are identical. It says, "Tool of Crime, Tool of Law Enforcement." You know, these things that were sort of provocative. And, you know, I dug his style, and he liked my work, and he said, "Move to California. Move to San Diego, work with me, I will -- you can be my production manager for Sophisto, and I will also produce your tee shirts and I will pay you a royalty on them, selling, and you can oversee your own production, as well." And that was really fortunate that he offered that to me, because it allowed me to keep the dream alive.

And we had our office, and we had a warehouse with some screen printing equipment that we shared with a friend, whose equipment it was. But I set up a table with hinges and I would print my posters every night. And I was able to keep, you know, on a very humble scale, what I was doing alive.

Andy also knew how to use the computer, and he was friends with a guy, Dave Kinzie [ph], who I'd met once in Atlanta, when Andy lived in Atlanta, and who had moved out to California also, who was good on the computer. And the three of us decided, after about a year of doing Sophisto and it not doing very well, and my clothing not doing very well, and us all just really losing money in a different way, a different business, that we would form a design company together. And that initially was called FBI, the First Bureau of Imagery.

But then, Dave and Andy stopped getting along, and Dave pushed Andy out, which was interesting, because Andy was the guy I'd moved to California to work with, but Andy is a little bit difficult. So I continued to work with Dave and this other partner, Philip [ph], and we did BLK/MRKT. And doing graphic design for a living was a dramatic step up, creatively, for me. Because before, I had been screen printing, pulling a squeegee all day, and then at night going to Kinko's and designing my posters and -- or working on all my own stuff, sitting there, watching a movie, cutting stickers out.

I mean I've always worked a two-shift day, always, since I was in college. But, you know, I just felt like I was wasting most of my day doing manual labor, screen printing. At least once I started the graphic design business with Dave and Phil and Andy, that -- and they taught me how to use the computer -- I actually was refining my skills as an artist and designer, doing work for other people, that -- I always get good ideas for my own posters while I was doing research for, you know, a tee shirt graphic for this skateboard company, or --

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. FAIREY: You know, we actually -- I did the logo for Netscape's Mozilla browser.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, yeah, that's right.

MR. FAIREY: And -- yeah. And you know, stuff like that was, like, whoa. All of a sudden whole huge level of exposure for me, and that was just because, you know, these kind of hip guys from Netscape living in San Francisco would see my work around on the streets there. As soon as I got to San Diego I started taking the Southwest \$39 --

MS. BERMAN: Yes, so did you just -- had you not really explored or put up a lot of stuff in California --

MR. FAIREY: No, I went --

MS. BERMAN: -- before you [inaudible] there?

MR. FAIREY: I went to -- I had been to -- I got arrested in Long Beach, actually, right before I moved to -- about six months before I moved to California, putting up posters during a trade show there. And I had --

MS. BERMAN: That's funny you still were like, "I'll still do it. I'll still move out there."

MR. FAIREY: And -- yeah. And I had also done -- gone to San Francisco for about four or five days, just to put up stickers and stencils and stuff in 1995. And -- but people already knew my stuff out there, because it -- just virally, people had gotten stickers and put them up there. And -- but -- yeah.

But once I was living in California, I would drive to LA, I would take Southwest up to San Francisco, and I -- yeah, it was a new playground. I was really excited to put stuff up, and worked very -- you know, worked very hard to get stuff out there.

MS. BERMAN: So -- and did you -- I guess you -- I mean did you feel like you could start going forward, even more now than you had -- something that you were doing during the day with the graphic design that really was affecting your own work, you know, not your commercial graphic design work? But, I mean, did things seem to feel like they were coming a little closer together?

MR. FAIREY: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. I mean the cool thing about -- it's so funny, because the perception from all this stuff -- I won't even read the Internet any more, but when I used to be a masochist -- was that my street art campaign built up a huge amount of resonance which I would then cash in on.

In fact, when I originally started doing graphic design stuff, most people didn't know my street art yet, and a lot of the graphic design stuff that was happening was because we made a brochure that we sent out to a lot of companies that showed work we had all done for different skateboard companies and things, and Levi's, and things like that, some of it which were just comps on spec, but we positioned it as if it were real jobs. And this was right when skateboarding and action sports -- Mountain Dew, the X Games -- was becoming, like, oh, this

could be as big as little league.

And so, if anything, my appeal to people was not that I was a guerilla marketer or street artist, but that I had done good work in the skateboard industry. And the skateboard industry is pretty insular. A lot of those people are like, "I don't want to do stuff for Doritos," or whoever. And so, we were the people that could be the gateway to the aesthetics that would appeal to that demographic, the elusive action sports demographic, which was seen as the next, you know, untapped gold mine by corporations.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. FAIREY: And so, I was thrilled that, first of all, you know, I was getting to further, you know, perpetuate the aesthetics and rebellion of skateboarding and everything, even if it was just to make a paycheck and, you know, work with these corporations. But I knew a lot of pro skateboarders that used to make, you know, \$600 a month salary, and then, as soon as the X Games hit, they got all these endorsements and they were like, "Yeah, I'm making \$10,000 a month now," and that's because of Mountain Dew and all those people.

MS. BERMAN: Right, right.

MR. FAIREY: So they're like, "Screw the corporate guys. Thanks for the money, though." And so, you know, I certainly didn't feel like I was, you know, I was ruining the culture that had created me. I was excited that I was getting to make a better living making good graphic design, and I felt like these are people that, now that this culture is resonating broadly enough, they are going to do their crappy version of it to address it. I might as well make sure that it's more authentic and better and less insulting.

MS. BERMAN: Right, right.

MR. FAIREY: And so, you know, that was exciting. And, you know, I had always been fairly prolific. But the great thing about learning graphic design on the computer was that it sped things up a lot, not just because it was a good tool, technically, to allow me to do things that took longer by hand, but also because trial and error -- a lot of times, when I was making a print, when I was doing everything by hand, I had to, you know, intellectualize what the result would be, make the separations, print it, and if it didn't come out the way I imagined, I had to go a few steps back and rework.

With the computer, you could actually see, more or less, what the end result was going to look like. And, you know, it rapidly accelerated that trial and error that's always been part of my process, because I don't think I am just intuitively brilliant at making images. I -- the process I say is, you know -- it's leaving no stone unturned, being very relentless about knowing what kind of result I want to get, not necessarily knowing how to get there, but just not stopping until I have achieved it. And --

MS. BERMAN: So did this really let you -- because you could really fly through things, I mean, could you add so many more additions to something that you were doing, or --

MR. FAIREY: Yeah. I mean then there was the other -- the added problem, though, that -- of just production time. My day was, I worked doing graphic design, and then I left at 6:00 and I -- and when the screen printing stuff was in the back of our own studio, I just went and screen printed at 6:00, and screen printed for two or three hours. It took between two and three hours to print one color on 100 posters -- or on 200 posters I mean, yeah. And I would -- you know, because I would do 100 for the street, and 100 regular ones. So I would be printing 200 posters, and it took me two to three hours to do that. And I would lay down a color, and then the next night I would lay down the second color. So if it was a two-color print, great, it would take two nights, three color, four color, which -- when you look at just how time-consuming that is, you look at why I adhered so consistently to a two to three-color palette, because I -- you know, if I did all four-color posters, I would get half as many done in a year as if I did all two-color posters. So if I'm going to make two-color posters really strong, then I could be that much more productive.

And I couldn't afford to get anybody to help me. So, yes, it definitely accelerated my ability to make images. But frequently I was behind on producing them. And, you know, eventually, in 1999, I got to where I was making enough money where I hired somebody to help me out, and that was a really big break-through, because he could be printing -- and at first I only let him print the first color, or the first and second color, and I always printed the black, where the precision was more important --

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. FAIREY: -- and I was so particular about that. And I am still very particular about my work, even when it's about achieving perfect imperfection, like little idiosyncracies make it more appealing, but they have to be the right ones.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. FAIREY: Yeah.

MS. BERMAN: Right. And was that the first time you really had an assistant or anybody else working with you?

MR. FAIREY: Yeah. I mean I worked in a collaborative capacity --

MS. BERMAN: Sure.

MR. FAIREY: -- in some ways with the guys in my -- you know, in BLK/MRKT. But, you know, having, you know, somebody under me doing it -- but that's -- actually, that's not true. I had a few employees when I was doing Alternate Graphics in Providence. My girlfriend worked with me for a while, and then I actually hired a couple people. But they mostly worked on production work. And if that freed me up to print OBEY posters or OBEY -- or Andre stickers, great. But a lot of it was like, okay, I just can't bear printing, like, B.U.M. -- bootleg B.U.M. equipment sweatshirts for a guy that's got a booth at the flea market downstairs. It's like, "Eh, yeah, you can work with puff ink, right?"

I -- so I was really losing money doing that. But, you know, my friend, Andrew, who -- Andrew Jeffrey Wright, he's part of the Space 1026 collective in Philly -- you know, he worked for me printing, and --

MS. BERMAN: Oh, I actually had something -- I also make short little films on the side, and we had a show at that space.

MR. FAIREY: Oh, cool, yeah.

MS. BERMAN: It was, like, a couple years ago.

MR. FAIREY: Yeah. I did a show there in 1999.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, wow, okay.

MR. FAIREY: Yeah. Those guys that are part of that, most of them worked with me in Providence.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, wow. Okay.

MR. FAIREY: Yeah, and a lot of them went to RISD. Ben Woodward [ph] went to RISD. This guy, Adam Wallcabbage [ph], didn't go to RISD, but he hung around in Providence a lot. He's the first one to shoot my studio, which had a skateboard mini-ramp in it, and get it in Thrasher, and --

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. FAIREY: -- another guy, John Freeborn [ph], that was part of it, went to RISD. Andrew Jeffrey Wright didn't go to RISD, but he lived in Providence for a while, worked for me cutting stickers and printing posters.

But there is another collective called Fort Thunder that, if you do any research on Providence, they were like a big deal, in terms of art and music and poster-making. Three of the guys that were the founders of that collective worked for me coating screens and shooting and cleaning screens, and did internships with me to get credit for RISD. And then, would use my equipment when they couldn't get access to the RISD equipment.

And in fact, when I was leaving Providence, they were making all these school posters, and they were going to run out of places to, you know, get a favor and shoot screens. So they bought a tanning bed, used, because it's cheaper than a silk screen exposure unit.

MS. BERMAN: Wow.

MR. FAIREY: And they used the tanning bed to expose the screens.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, my God.

MR. FAIREY: Because of the UV light.

MS. BERMAN: Wow.

MR. FAIREY: And -- yeah. And then, you know, so -- and now, still to this day, there is a huge culture of screen-printed posters in Providence -- and I'm not trying to take credit for this movement, but when I was at RISD, screen printing was like the red-headed stepchild of the print-making department. It was like, "Ooh, that's like the icky commercial print-making form. Etching and lithography are so much more sophisticated, sexy,

seductive. What are you doing?"

And it's so funny how, you know, now Providence -- RISD loves to claim the fact that I went there, the Fort Thunder guys went there --

MS. BERMAN: Sure, I'm sure.

MR. FAIREY: -- Seth McFarlane went there. You know, but back then it was like, "Ugh, that's not elegant."

MS. BERMAN: That's so funny. Well, so --

MR. FAIREY: Peasants can use that medium.

MS. BERMAN: So did you -- when you hired an assistant, they were never doing actual design work with you? They were just doing --

MR. FAIREY: No, no.

MS. BERMAN: -- all the [inaudible].

MR. FAIREY: And --

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. FAIREY: And, you know, I work with assistants helping me now -- I mean I still --

MS. BERMAN: And this is now -- just for the record -- 2003 you started Studio Number One. BLK/MRKT sort of --

MR. FAIREY: Yeah.

MS. BERMAN: -- disbanded?

MR. FAIREY: BLK/MRKT disbanded. I mean for years I've had people do things, simple things like, "Oh, I want to do an illustration from this picture, will you scan it from this book," but they're not actually working on the art.

MS. BERMAN: Right, right.

MR. FAIREY: And the -- you know, back in Providence -- I mean in San Diego -- there was a guy who -- sometimes people gave me ideas. Like, even in Providence, my friend, Ben, who became part of Space 1026, he said, "Oh, the Sherwin Williams log is really great, and it says, 'Cover the Earth' on it. You should do something with that."

So then I put the paint dripping over Andre's head, instead of over the globe, and "Cover the Earth," and all that. And I put a little -- because it was Ben's idea, where the copyright logo normally is with a "C," I put a "B" in the circle.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, that's --

MR. FAIREY: And I was like, "Yeah, Ben, there you go. There's your props on that." And he wasn't proprietary about it.

MS. BERMAN: Sure.

MR. FAIREY: He was like, "This is a good idea for you to use, please use this idea."

MS. BERMAN: So it's always sort of been in your -- you know, everything. I mean I know I keep going back to it, but, like, you give stickers out to other people to put up, you know, friends are giving you ideas, it's all very sort of this open kind of, you know --

MR. FAIREY: Yeah. And, I mean, it's -- yeah, I would say that there is no -- I mean I don't know if there is no such thing as an original idea, but I actually --

MS. BERMAN: Everybody gets ideas from --

MR. FAIREY: Yeah. I mean, you know, influences are everywhere.

MS. BERMAN: Yeah.

MR. FAIREY: I have always tried to be really transparent about mine. And you know, I want to demystify art.

People that are like, "Don't pay attention to the man behind the curtain, I am the mighty Oz, you know, I make art and you must bow down," I just -- I laugh at that. It's, you know, it's corny and manipulative, and you know, I feel sorry for the people that fall for the emperor's new clothes, you know?

But anyway, yeah. So, I mean, there is another image that I did -- I did an image that was of a printing press, and it was called "Think and Create, Paste and Destroy"-- or "Print and Destroy," I mean. And "Skate and Destroy" is like a slogan about, you know, sort of the aggression of skateboarding, that when you grind on a curb it actually breaks up the concrete, you grind in a pool, it shreds the coping. And so, that's always -- that sort of - you know, the idea that, you know, you have to destroy the old to build the new, that there is this aggression to what I do, and referencing skateboarding, thinking "Create, Print, and Destroy" was something I'm able -- a friend, Vren [ph], was like, "Oh, I found this image of these guys putting up posters. You should rework that and do something with that."

And so, I did another one, where it used the same borders and formula as the "Print and Destroy," but it was "Paste and Destroy." And so, you know, my friend, who actually was working for me in San Diego, he gave me the idea, the reference, but I did the art, you know.

So --

MS. BERMAN: Right, right, right.

MR. FAIREY: But I've never been, like, "Oh, no, somebody now said this idea. I can't do that, because" --

MS. BERMAN: They might --

MR. FAIREY: Yeah, because they mentioned it, and now it's -- you know, it didn't come to me in a dream. I mean that's absurd. But --

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. FAIREY: But anyway, you know, now I -- you know, I work on -- every piece of art that I would show in an art show, or every poster I make, is worked on by me. But for my clothing line, I have my graphic designers here help. And they remix stuff I have made, or they do something in the spirit of what I made, and then I critique it, and I say, "Oh, change this to this." But --

MS. BERMAN: That's also got to be great, though, to see somebody else, you know, working with sort of your thoughts in mind.

MR. FAIREY: Right.

MS. BERMAN: Like -- that's got to be very --

MR. FAIREY: Yeah, you know, a visual language. And what I -- I'm always, you know, trying to cultivate in them, you know, that, you know, the same mentality, this approach of, like, it's got to be democratic. If -- it can reference things, but there needs to be a twist that gives it new meaning. You know, it needs to be iconic in whatever way. And there is a lot of different aesthetic routes to that.

But you know, also with -- the cool thing with clothing is that it's -- next to street art, it's probably the most ephemeral medium.

MS. BERMAN: Right, right.

MR. FAIREY: And, you know, I choose all the things that are impermanent and frowned upon. But you know, everyone is like, "Fashion? That is so shallow. Street art? That's vandalism." But the cool thing is that, with my art -- now, especially -- I feel like there needs to be maybe a little bit more weight, a little more seriousness to a lot of it. And I feel a lot of pressure not to make pop art for pop art's sake that just sort of adds to the pile of mediocrity, like I was saying, but to make things that I think are meaningful.

But, you know, with fashion it can be a little more fun. And -- but I always look at it like, you know, it's a tool for, you know, pollinating a new audience. And somebody says, like, "Oh, you know, that just looks cool," and then go OBEY, and there is URLs on the tag and the shirt, and then they find out that this thing they just thought looked cool and could function just like any other shallow fashion item actually has a story behind it, and it's a gateway into a -- you know, into that world. So --

MS. BERMAN: And do you think a lot of people are actually buying it that way, that they aren't familiar with your other -- with your work at all? That they were just --

MR. FAIREY: Yeah, yeah.

MS. BERMAN: Really?

MR. FAIREY: Yeah. I got an email just -- right after I released that Second Amendment Solutions print from a guy that said, "Hey, you know, I bought a few of your shirts because I thought they were cool, and then I finally went to the website on the tag, and man, you are just -- you are a misguided dude without a single original thought in your head. I am giving away these shirts, and I am not buying another one ever, or allowing my family members to buy any." You know, "You're like a" --

MS. BERMAN: Wow.

MR. FAIREY: "You're another one of those brainwashed liberals," and, you know, I wrote back to him and I said, "Here are my reasons for opposing handguns," and, you know -- "But debate is an important part of our freedoms. I would love to hear why you think I'm brainwashed, and what your justification for handguns is. Maybe it's something I haven't considered."

No response. So -- but yeah, so it's -- you know, but then I had a friend who generally is left-leaning that sent me a whole thing about, like, "You might not realize it, but the government is scared of you. Not because you vote, but because you have a handgun," and he has this very sort of Libertarian survivalist -- a bit paranoid --

MS. BERMAN: Wow.

MR. FAIREY: -- theory about why handguns or guns are important. And it's sort of a worst-case scenario. And, you know, he and I had our back-and-forth, and hopefully --

MS. BERMAN: Is this what was on your website?

MR. FAIREY: Yeah.

MS. BERMAN: Okay. Yeah, yeah.

MR. FAIREY: Did you read that?

MS. BERMAN: Yes, I did read it.

MR. FAIREY: You know, and I was saying, like, you know, "If we were living in Mad Max's world, I'd probably want to have a hand gun, but I'm trying to make art that --

MS. BERMAN: Yeah.

MR. FAIREY: -- takes us in the opposite direction.

MS. BERMAN: I liked that.

MR. FAIREY: Thanks. But anyway, you know, my hope is that maybe that guy, as much as he's like, "I, you know, I have held guns as sacred for all these years, and I have to say fuck you, but now I'm actually thinking about it," damn it. You know, that that guy -- there is the possibility that he will be provoked into thinking about it in a way he hasn't thought about it, and something will be achieved.

And, you know, for all the people that will be like, "Some stupid frat guy was wearing an OBEY shirt, that's not cool, they don't know what's up with it," I'm like, yeah, a frat guy that actually might get something out of it and be your good friend in a year.

MS. BERMAN: Right, right.

MR. FAIREY: You know?

MS. BERMAN: I mean, it's hard. I don't even -- I always -- I feel like they're just always there, you know, the Andre stickers, OBEY stickers, they're always just sort of out there. I can't --

MR. FAIREY: Yeah.

MS. BERMAN: It's like I can't really imagine life before them, or -- but --

MR. FAIREY: How old are you?

MS. BERMAN: I'm 34, so --

MR. FAIREY: Yeah, so -- I'm 40.

MS. BERMAN: So, you know, they've been around for a while. But I would think that, you know, even the frat guy has seen them and knows what they are. You know, so it's not like it's an alien -- it would be totally --

MR. FAIREY: Well --

MS. BERMAN: -- removed from people's, I guess --

MR. FAIREY: Do you want to grab some lunch?

MS. BERMAN: Sure . Yeah, sure. You know what? Here, let me pause this.

[Audio break.]

MS. BERMAN: We are picking back up with the interview with Shepard Fairey on February 10, 2011. And this is the third segment.

And we were -- we had just been talking about the -- you know, you working -- having a graphic design business, you know, with commercial endeavors, sort of, and how that was also kind of allowing you more freedom with your -- you know, the fine art, and how there was a lot of back-and-forth.

MR. FAIREY: Right. Well, the -- I had mentioned that working as a graphic designer had made my process as an artist more efficient, and also gave me a venue to try out techniques for a client, where it was less consequential to my own art. And if I liked the way something was working, then I would take that technique and apply it to my own work. So it was really great, as sort of a -- you know, a trial and error component.

But the other really important thing was that, as a graphic designer, I began to make enough money where I could hire a print assistant, I could hire someone to help send out the mail order posters. I had built a website in 1997, late 1997, that really, after an article came out in Juxtapose in 1998, really started to get a decent amount of traffic and, you know, I started to sell multiple prints per week --

MS. BERMAN: Wow.

MR. FAIREY: -- on my website.

MS. BERMAN: So when you say -- how many is that, like?

MR. FAIREY: Oh, I think it started off where, you know, the website was maybe impacting my income by \$500 to \$1,000 a month.

MS. BERMAN: Wow.

MR. FAIREY: But that was -- because, you know, I -- most of my life was pretty inexpensive, I've been frugal, the -- in terms of what I could do with that money, it was significant. And I hired somebody to come in, first, a day a week to send out the mail order, or, you know -- and then, you know, more and more.

But working as a graphic designer, and then my website broadening the reach of, you know, of my work, those two things were really helpful in freeing me up to spend more time out -- I didn't have to do all the printing myself, I hired a print assistant. I didn't have to do all the mail order fulfillment myself. So I spent more time going on trips, to put posters up, spent more time doing street art.

And you know, I mentioned while we were at lunch my ritual was I would work as a designer in the week and get -- you know, design at night on my own stuff, or print, or go out and put stuff up in San Diego. On the weekends I would frequently either drive to LA to put stuff up, or I would fly up to San Francisco.

And the -- you know, the great thing was having done a lot of work in New York, and then doing a lot of work in LA, I had the two real cultural epicenters of the country -- and then, you know, San Francisco is important, as well -- covered with my stuff. And, you know, that meant that all of the magazines and art galleries and all of the places that were in those two cities knew about what I was doing. And, in a sense, that -- you know, that will create that trickle-down effect of it getting to everywhere else.

And -- but in 2000, when Bush got elected, I remember that being a -- this was around the same time I was able to do more traveling and had a little bit more financial freedom to make more stickers and make more posters. I also decided, when Bush got elected, that I maybe needed to be a little bit more overt, politically. I actually made a poster before he got elected the first time that's "Fear Bush," with him with an SS hunting cap on with a burning city in the background. And that -- you know, I didn't expend a lot of effort proliferating that. There was

a website, FearBush.com, and they used it there, and I made some stickers of it, and it went around. But I was concerned. I was concerned about the direction that I thought George Bush would take the country.

And then I started making -- around -- within the next couple of years, the In Lesser Gods We Trust series, with Nixon, and then some of the money images, saying, "This is Your God," which was also -- the This is Your God series was inspired by They Live, because when Rowdy Roddy Piper puts on the glasses and he looks at money, he says, "This is Your God." So, you know, I was doing -- I had done OBEY as a -- inspired by the movie They Live, and then I did This is Your God, inspired by They Live.

And when I did -- I did a show in 2003 called This is Your God, and I actually -- every invite, 1,000 invites that went out, I stamped -- I put a dollar in there, stamped with an Andre face over George Washington on one side, and then, "This is Your God" on the other side. And I sent those out, and most people got it. And you know, of course, it was a show that I --

MS. BERMAN: Where was the show?

MR. FAIREY: At a gallery called Sixspace, downtown L.A.

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. FAIREY: And you know, I was funding everything myself. The gallery -- I said, "Oh, I'm going to put \$1 in 1,000 invites, and will you guys help pay for that?" And they said, "No." So, the funny thing that was -- I sent those out, and one woman who apparently was on their mailing list but didn't know my work called up and said, "I think there is a mistake. I got a dollar in my invite to this art show."

MS. BERMAN: That's great.

MR. FAIREY: An older woman. And they said, "Oh, well, that's got the artist's -- it's art stamped on it," and you know, "It's probably something you should hang on to," and she said, "I've never heard of this guy. I'll see if I, you know, if I hear about something. If not, can I spend it? You can spend it with a stamp on it, right?"

Well, you know, the great thing about that is that if you hang on to it and frame it or whatever, it is, you know, a piece of propaganda. If it's spent, it circulates.

MS. BERMAN: Right, right.

MR. FAIREY: With the stamp on it. And it's a piece of propaganda. So it's going to --

MS. BERMAN: Have you ever run into one of those --

MR. FAIREY: It's going to work out, either way.

MS. BERMAN: Have you ever run into one of those dollars in circulation?

MR. FAIREY: No, I haven't. But you know, then, for my show in 2007, the E Pluribus Venom show I did in New York, I printed 50,000 bills of the two sides of capitalism; one side looks like U.S. currency, the other side looks like a stock certificate.

And the stock certificate side is about, you know, the positive side of being industrious, and hard working, and you know, the idea that, you know, the American Dream fulfilled is you work hard and you're rewarded and you -- you know, you can shape things into your own personal version of utopia. And, you know, that's something I try to live in my life as -- within capitalism, as an entrepreneur and everything, you know, doing a lot of philanthropy and social cause-oriented work.

But, you know, so if you make money, you have the freedom to do these good things. You have the -- you know, there is not just an allotment you get. Yet, the other side is the bad side of capitalism, the -- you know, oppression, economic imperialism, wage slavery, you know, obsession with material goods, et cetera.

So, I printed up those bills. But I would fold them so that it was the U.S. dollar-looking side, and we would leave them on the ground, and people would always pick them up. And the sad thing was, in New York, we were throwing them on the sidewalk, you know, in the blocks near the gallery. A woman wanders into the gallery, a homeless woman, and she sees the huge art piece of the dollar on the wall, and she was like, "I thought I found a dollar the other day, and it was one of these, it was that thing. So you're the one behind this." And I was like, "Hey, you know, there was -- we got some extra food over here," so we gave her some food.

But yes, it has happened that somebody had a dollar, but not those that I stamped that were, literally, the U.S. currency.

MS. BERMAN: Right, right.

MR. FAIREY: But anyway, so -- yeah. I think that my fear of what would happen under Bush led to some more overtly political work. And then, when the Iraq War started, that was when I really stepped it up, in terms of taking, you know, a position about something that was going on. And I made a lot of anti-Bush and anti-Iraq pieces, starting -- Iraq War pieces, starting around 2003 and you know, continuing up until recently.

I still -- you know, I still feel like what's going on in Afghanistan is not great, not that -- it's just such a complex problem that I don't think, you know, throwing money and troops at the problem is the answer. There is up sides and down sides to everything with that, you know, but my feeling is it's not a fixable situation.

But anyway -- but Iraq, on the other hand, was no, I'm not a fan of Saddam Hussein, but at least it was stable. And we went in there, destabilized it under, you know, under false pretenses, lying about the weapons of mass destruction. And I think that everybody knew -- high up, knew that that was a lie. And the moment I started seeing Bush talk about Iraq after 9/11 -- that's the other thing that was a big deal for me, was 9/11 created this climate of fear and self-censorship that I knew Bush saw as incredibly primed for him to make his next move.

And so, when I heard him start talking about Iraq, I was like he -- this is just -- this is an opportunity he sees. This has nothing to do with reality. This is an opportunity. And I don't know what's driving it. I don't know -- you know, I had all these theories that, you know, we'd get in there and try to take control of the oil, that the Euro had become, you know -- the European Union had become the strongest economic force in the world, once things had consolidated under the Euro, and the U.S. had lost its position of ultimate power and domination, and that somehow Iraq was, you know, was a piece of the puzzle we needed.

I -- you know, Bush was mad that his dad didn't finish the job, whatever, but it was all bullshit. I knew it was all bullshit. And I couldn't believe that people were -- they seemed so desperate after 9/11 to find a -- something to unite around, to feel good about the United States around, and you know, it was -- I think it was -- was it Goebbels who said -- or Hitler himself, who said, "The easiest way to unite the people is to find an outside enemy"? That's exactly what Bush did. And, you know, anything that might be slightly ethically complicated, we just make it seem like, you know, the Patriot Act, invading Iraq, these are the kinds of things that, when you have these outside threats, you have to -- you know, you have to embrace.

And yes, it was very upsetting to me. So, yes, I made a lot of work that was very direct about the war in Iraq, about the culture, surveillance, about, I don't know, a lot of other things that were bothering me. I could look through my book, probably, and see some of them.

MS. BERMAN: Okay. So you --

MR. FAIREY: But --

MS. BERMAN: It was such a big shift, then, from going -- from very early on, being like almost political style -- you know, the -- or sort of, you know, political style to really, really just full on making a statement. I mean did you --

MR. FAIREY: Yeah.

MS. BERMAN: You just felt you had to do it, or had you been wanting to do this for a while,

or --

MR. FAIREY: I felt that the country -- the people who were speaking most loudly were the ones wanting to take the country in the worst direction. And I felt that I needed to be a counterpoint to those voices, and that I was willing to be controversial to have some people say, "Whatever happened to your softer approach? Lead people in the general direction of their own epiphany, but don't tell them what to do," that I would say, "Well," you know, "I think that what's going on right now is dire enough that I need to respond to it and take a stand, and you know, and be outspoken.

MS. BERMAN: And with these more overtly political images, were they -- were a lot of them, you know, for galleries? Were they -- were you putting them up on the street? What were you doing with --

MR. FAIREY: Oh, every -- yeah. Everything was going up on the street.

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. FAIREY: And some of this stuff was going to galleries. I mean the -- after I did the initial Bush image, I did the Bush -- I reprised the image with him and the burning city in the background, and then it said, "War is the Answer. Elect Bush and Still Get Gore." And then, you know, I think there was another version of it that said,

"War: Everyone Wants it Except for Smart People in the UN."

Yeah, you know, I was being a bit flippant and obnoxious, but I just thought the lunatics are running the asylum. That -- I did that, and then I did the collaboration with Robbie Conal. And Mear, this graffiti artist, and we -- I did Bush hugging the bomb, and it had the type -- "Was it hug babies and drop bombs, or drop bombs and hug babies?"

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. FAIREY: And -- I mean, or drop babies and hug bombs. And then it also said, "We need to" -- oh, God. I'll find it. Trying to remember --

MS. BERMAN: How was doing a collaboration with Robbie Conal, after having so early on in your career seen -- you know, been affected by his work?

MR. FAIREY: It was great. You know, Robbie is a really smart guy, really funny. He is -- you know, he's great to work with. And you know, I felt like the unity of us doing that project together was really good, in that, you know, it brought all of our audiences together, and it felt like there was some -- felt like there was some critical mass. I was really disappointed when Bush was re-elected in 2004. That was what we were all working to prevent. But it -- you know, I still felt like there was a lot of great energy with working with Robbie.

Where is that image? Come on. It's in here.

MS. BERMAN: It's on the bottom, right at a page, isn't it? I feel like I just looked at it.

MR. FAIREY: Yeah, there is that -- the money sheets, right there.

MS. BERMAN: [Inaudible.]

MR. FAIREY: And "This is Your God." It's funny how -- you know, I -- sometimes I work really hard on the phrasing of copy to -- you know, to get it right, to be -- make the point and, you know, have some sort of maybe clever twist. And then I can't remember it.

MS. BERMAN: There's a lot of phrases that don't -- it's to be expected.

MR. FAIREY: Yes. Yeah, here we go, yeah.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, yeah.

MR. FAIREY: I knew it was -- "We need to use our global supremacy to protect our children really means we need to use our children to protect our global supremacy."

MS. BERMAN: So how many of those did you make?

MR. FAIREY: We made 20,000.

MS. BERMAN: Wow.

MR. FAIREY: Of each of the posters. And we did bombing trips -- or postering trips -- in New York, in San Francisco, and in L.A., and I just sent the posters out and then, you know, Robbie and his assistants sent a lot of posters out. And there is the "Contra Diction" image right there.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, yeah.

MR. FAIREY: And yeah, it's funny. Like, my -- you know, I'm kind of embarrassed of like the Bush is Hitler thing, because it was pretty juvenile. And as -- you know, as horrible as I think Bush was, it was really Dick Cheney that should have had the Hitler moustache. But, I mean, Dick Cheney, that guy is evil. He is -- I don't think I have ever seen someone, without any sort of hesitation, lie, spread hate, manipulate, like he does. Just completely free of conscience, that guy.

But you know, because now I see people put, like, you know, a Hitler moustache on Obama or whatever, and I'm like, "Oh, please," you know. But I'm sure all the right-wingers were thinking that when they saw this poster of mine. But, you know, this served, in a lot of ways, as, you know -- maybe it was spitting into the wind, but it was -- it made me feel like I wasn't just sitting around, doing nothing.

And you know, what I've tried to do -- I mean the interesting thing about this project was that in -- what I did in 2004 very much informed what I would do in 2008.

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. FAIREY: Because seeing how a lot of people responded that already agreed with me and saying, "Yeah, yeah," you know, energizing the base, so to speak, that was great. But it seemed to just give further motivation to the people that supported Bush, to see that, you know, this opposition wasn't going to sneak up on them. They were going to make sure they were out voting. And it wasn't --

MS. BERMAN: What was --

MR. FAIREY: It was about division, not -- it wasn't about uniting people, or finding common ground, or having people appealing to their higher sense of humanity. It was about attacking Bush. And I do think that it's very patriotic to see things wrong with the country and criticize them, as long as you are advocating for a superior alternative.

MS. BERMAN: Not just criticizing to criticize.

MR. FAIREY: Yeah, yeah. And the sad thing was that, in 2004, I didn't really like John Kerry that much. I liked him as the lesser of two evils. I liked him better.

But in 2008, when I was inspired by Obama, you know, I saw him give his speech at the Democratic Convention in 2004, thought, wow, this guy is very articulate, inspiring, did a little bit of research. When he announced his candidacy, I read that he supported a lot of things that I supported, lowering the -- decreasing the influence of lobbyists, universal health care. He opposed the war in Iraq when Hillary [Rodham Clinton] had supported it. You know, I was inspired by Obama. And I thought, "I need to make an image that is about -- not about criticizing the Republicans, but about saying, you know, we can do better, and this is the way."

And so, you know, that's why I took the approach with the Obama poster. And when people have said, "Oh, that was a real change in your -- in how you do things, or where you're coming from," or whatever, really, I didn't think it was, because I had opposed all these policies that Bush had that Obama also opposed. So, rather than just saying I am anti-Bush or I am anti-Republican, saying, "I support this guy for these reasons." I had seen the failure of the negative approach in 2004, and felt like I -- to achieve the very same ends that I was trying to achieve then, take a different approach in 2008.

MS. BERMAN: Do you think that people had that reaction because, unlike a lot of -- you know, like, unlike the bomb-hugging baby poster, with that poster there wasn't a lot of -- there was not really -- I mean there -- except for the little star, I think the original had a star, except for the star with the face in it, there wasn't, you know, a lot of humor, or a clever wordplay or, you know, some of your other signifying --

MR. FAIREY: Right.

MS. BERMAN: There was still, like, a little levity. It was just a very sort of direct, almost -- but not clean of humor, but -- you know what I mean? Like, just sort of like --

MR. FAIREY: Well, it was reverent and sincere.

MS. BERMAN: Yeah.

MR. FAIREY: And I didn't -- you know, where my OBEY campaign has utilized, you know, a lot of irony and irreverence, I wanted to make sure that people knew I was very serious about this image, about the Obama image, that -- you know, there is -- one thing that frustrates me about the world is it tends to reduce things to these -- you know, these categories, these more one-dimensional ways of looking at things. It's incredibly aggravating. I think, you know, there is times to make jokes, there is times to be, you know, a friend, there is, you know, times to do whatever you want, be by yourself. You know, there is just -- life has got, you know, all sorts of different needs and different ways of -- that are appropriate for addressing those needs at different times.

And I felt like the need at this moment was to demonstrate that I do take democracy seriously. I take the political process seriously. When I see someone -- as disappointed as I might be in most of it, when I see somebody that I think has genuine merit come around, I'm not going to say, "Oh, it's just going to be business as usual." I am actually going to point out that it might not be business as usual.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. FAIREY: And you know, and hope for that, and say, "I am willing to, against all odds, because our two-party system is garbage, but it's still better garbage than a lot of other things out there," say, "But I am willing to be optimistic about the possibility here, with Obama."

And in most of the criticism that I see from people that are also progressives is that their conception of how things -- what I should do, or how things should work, is not something that is actually achievable, in reality. And, in fact, they don't want it to be, because that doesn't give them an axe to grind.

And so, I felt like I did what made the most sense, was look at the best scenario in the moment, and dedicate time and energy to, you know, trying to achieve that scenario, being Barack Obama as President. So I -- you know, I put a ton of energy into disseminating the images, to, you know, supporting the grass roots movement around not only my image, but all the other art, the art shows, doing a lot of interviews, because I felt it was important.

A lot of people were like, "Oh, yeah, Mr. Limelight Hog, Shepard Fairey, did all these interviews around Obama." I was so sick of doing Obama interviews. But my thought was always that if I can remind people that voting does make a difference, that images make a difference, how you spend your money makes a difference, and that, you know, young people don't have a big say because young people don't participate -- not because they couldn't have a bigger say -- that stuff was really important to me.

And it was -- you know, it was worth, I thought, worth spending the time because I had made this image that had achieved such a degree of traction -- I never could have imagined it became this runaway phenomenon -- that I needed to seize the moment to explain why I thought, you know, Obama was important, why the poster was important, why grass roots activism was important.

MS. BERMAN: And you were -- I mean you were getting this out and, as you said, people could downloading it from the website, you were sending posters out.

MR. FAIREY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. BERMAN: Was there one place over another where it was really going crazy, or that you were focusing on, or was it really just trying to get out as many --

MR. FAIREY: Well, during the period when all the caucuses and primaries were going, we were just targeting the next one, you know, "Oh, Texas is happening, get the stuff to Texas."

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. FAIREY: You know, and then it would show up in Rolling Stone, photos of a wall with a whole bunch of posters, you know. And I -- you know, Yosi, who helped me a lot with it, he was very connected with all the different --

MS. BERMAN: And that's Yosi Sergeant?

MR. FAIREY: Yeah.

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. FAIREY: Sergeant.

MS. BERMAN: Sergeant, okay.

MR. FAIREY: Yeah. Yosi was very connected. He worked for a PR firm, so they -- you know, and he had done a lot of grass roots stuff already. And so he could say, "Oh, I've got the address and the number for, you know, Obama's campaign office, or the Democratic office in Austin," like, "We're going to get stuff there." And I helped to do the interviews, create fine art that we -- you know, Russell Simmons commissioned a canvas, and I sold it to him, and then same sizes -- same stencils were used as the one that's in the National Portrait Gallery -- and I took that money, and I invested it all in making more posters and sending out more free posters. So --

MS. BERMAN: And -- so you were --

MR. FAIREY: -- Yosi was doing a lot of facilitation, and I was producing and, you know, and then I was also reaching out to artists. We had a lot of friends that are sort of part of the Juxtapoz Magazine network. And the editor of Juxtapoz, Matt Revelli, he was an Obama supporter. And the owner of the magazine. Gwynn Vitello -- her husband is the one that started Independent Truck Company, the skateboard trucks --

MS. BERMAN: Oh, wow.

MR. FAIREY: Yeah, Fausto Vitello. She was a big Obama supporter. So, you know, we all were reaching out to our networks to harness people who were creative that may have never done anything like this before that would do an image for Obama.

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. FAIREY: And so --

MS. BERMAN: And so this was -- and you were -- what were you having them do, exactly?

MR. FAIREY: Well, Yosi and I, you know, just said to people, "If you think that it would be not cool to have a Republican president, and you like where Obama's coming from, use the tool set that you have, use the power that you have, to make an image. And, you know, we'll help get it out there, and we'll make sure that it earns some money to pay you something for your time. And, you know, only do it if that's genuinely how you feel."

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. FAIREY: "But if you do feel that, you know, it would be better if Obama is president, you know, there is no time to be wasted in helping out."

MS. BERMAN: So how many of these other images did you end up getting?

MR. FAIREY: I think -- well, I mean, there were probably initially maybe a dozen artists that did stuff.

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. FAIREY: Through -- Upper Playground is also the name of Matt Revelli's company, and they did -- they printed up the first tee shirts and sweatshirts of the Hope image, and they sold them and they raised money to print all these other posters. They were -- a lot of people were doing that.

Sticker Robot, the sticker company, I initially just used the money from selling posters to buy a run of 50,000 posters. But then they said, "Well, why don't we just make sticker packs, and we will funnel the profits back into making more stickers?" And I funneled them some more money. But eventually, half-a-million stickers were made.

MS. BERMAN: Wow.

MR. FAIREY: So --

MS. BERMAN: And then, for the distribution -- like you were saying, you were taking them to, you know, Austin, or wherever you were going -- you were taking them actually to, like, campaign headquarters in that city, but then also just putting them up yourselves, and --

MR. FAIREY: Yeah, I was out putting up posters. I got arrested at the DNC [Democratic National Convention] putting them up.

MS. BERMAN: That's right.

MR. FAIREY: Yeah.

MS. BERMAN: What happened there?

MR. FAIREY: We were out doing a wall, and we had some Obama posters and some OBEY posters on, like, different sections of the wall. And all of a sudden, literally, 20 riot cops with guns drawn surrounded us and arrested us. And, you know, I had a gun pointed six inches from my head.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, my God.

MR. FAIREY: You know, for putting up posters. And they kept saying we're anarchists. I'm like, "There is an Obama poster right there, we're not anarchists." And they're like, "Well, how come you're dressed in black?" "We like rock and roll? I don't know." But --

MS. BERMAN: I like that thought process.

MR. FAIREY: Yeah. But yeah, I was -- you know, and wherever I traveled, I -- you know, I went to New York and put up a huge -- you know, a hand-painted eight-foot version of the Obama poster at the corner of Houston and Bowery, and it stayed up for, you know, for a few months.

And I actually got graffiti'd on, and then people cleaned the graffiti off of it.

MS. BERMAN: Wow.

MR. FAIREY: Yeah.

MS. BERMAN: You're kidding.

MR. FAIREY: Because it's acrylic paint and oil-based spray paint, so take it off with solvent without destroying the acrylic paint.

MS. BERMAN: Wow. So do you have any idea how many images were downloaded? Can you count that?

MR. FAIREY: No, I don't know. And we changed computer servers -- the traffic on my site went up pretty dramatically during that time, because you could go get that download there, and people, you know, really wanted that poster. And the only place to get them was on eBay, and they were selling for between \$1,000 and \$5,000 on eBay.

MS. BERMAN: But you had been selling them on your site for, what, like --

MR. FAIREY: For \$45.

MS. BERMAN: So, that's a huge mark-up on eBay.

MR. FAIREY: Right. And the reason I only sold small quantities on my site for \$45 and reinvested that money into making more stuff, is because I knew that the idiots out there would say, "Shepard Fairey just jumped on this bandwagon because he can make money from it because that's all he does, is exploits left-wing causes to make money." So I wanted to make sure that, even though I was in some regards shooting myself in the foot because I wouldn't be able to generate as much money to plough back into making more stuff, that I felt I was 100 percent bullet-proof on whether I had made the image for righteous purposes or not.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. FAIREY: So --

MS. BERMAN: Those are a lot of hoops to jump through.

MR. FAIREY: Yes. And yet, still, when I ended up in the lawsuit, the AP's position was I just did it to make a bunch of money, and it doesn't matter that I donated all the money back to the campaign, or to making more materials, because that was my choice, and I can't, you know, deduct that from the gross of it that I would have to pay damages against.

MS. BERMAN: What was the campaign's reaction? I mean they were -- obviously liked the image, you know? And --

MR. FAIREY: Well, Amanda, my wife, was a -- was eight-and-a-half months pregnant when I made the image. And she actually said, "We're kind of busy with our family, you know, about to have another baby. Why don't you wait and see how Obama does in the primaries before you make an image?" And I said, "Well, I think this has got to be something that, hopefully, is going to be a part of the process of him doing well in the primaries."

MS. BERMAN: Right, right.

MR. FAIREY: "And there is not a second to waste." And so, I made the original image. I think I finished it on January 23, 2008 and had it posted on my website on the 25th, or finished it on the 24th and posted on the 25th. But anyway, immediately I started -- all these bigger websites, boing, boing, and the Huffington Post, and all sorts of people picked up on it.

And then the Obama campaign hit me up about a week later and said, "We love that this image is getting out there in a grass roots way." The guy who worked on the digital side of the Obama campaign knew my work, had been part of Punk Voter in 2004, said, "I think that it's best that you perpetuate this image grass roots. Because as soon as it's associated officially with a campaign, that might turn some people off that love that this happened really organically."

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. FAIREY: "But would you design an image in a similar style for us to use?" And so, that's when I did the Change image for them. And then, later on, I did the Vote image for them. And I donated my time, and actually was working on the illustration in the hospital the day before and the day that Madeline [ph] was born.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, my God.

MR. FAIREY: And, you know, got the art over to them, and they didn't get it into production for about three-and-a-half weeks, and I remember saying, "Like, what are you guys doing? I got my poster out in the public in, like, four days. You're the -- you've raised more money than any campaign in history, and it's been three weeks?" And Scott was like, "Yeah, we're finally getting it going."

But I remember just feeling really frustrated by the bureaucracy even within the Obama campaign before, you know, much less being frustrated by the bureaucracy now that he's President, but thinking, like, you know, this is why I -- for my whole life, I have taken matters into my own hands because, you know, you sit around and wait for it to happen by committee, it's never going to happen.

But I guess, probably by their standards, three-and-a-half weeks to get that thing going was pretty quick.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. FAIREY: But I said, you know, "I was thinking" -- I'll put it this way. By three-and-a-half more weeks, I had put out many, many tens of thousands more of the Hope poster.

MS. BERMAN: Right. What was the reaction -- I mean did you get a lot of reaction from just, you know, people on the fence about voting, or people who didn't know your work? You know, not the usual suspects, who would be like, "Oh, you know, I love his work, and here he loves Obama."

MR. FAIREY: Well, that was the really exciting thing about it, was that, unlike the anti-Bush stuff that, you know, started with people that were already like-minded and stayed with those people, when I made the Obama image, it, of course, was immediately embraced by people who liked Obama, but I quickly started getting emails and feedback from people who were saying, you know, "I saw this sticker, I liked this sticker. I wasn't sure about Obama, but then I checked out his website, he's actually got a lot of really good ideas. I bought his book, I watched him on YouTube, I did" -- whatever.

And probably the most important point I could make about the power of art is that because it's intuitive and -- not only in creating it, but in digesting it as a viewer -- it works differently than any other medium of communication. Like, if I -- you know, if it said, "Hey, I'm Michael Moore, and I want to talk to you about Barack Obama, you'd be like, "Oh, that guy, you know, he's a left-wing jerk, I'm not going to listen to it." If, "Read this article, written by so-and-so," these more intellectual approaches are not going to penetrate someone that's predisposed to saying, "That's not the point of view I want to hear, so I'm not even going to engage with it."

However, when somebody sees something that strikes them visually, makes them feel a certain way visually, they want to find an intellectual justification for this feeling. They can't, you know, "My head says this, my heart says this," they want to reconcile the two.

So, I think that the Obama image, for whatever reason -- I mean I tried to make it idealized and stylized and appealing and hopeful and powerful and all those things, but sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. This one just worked where a lot of people saw it and said, you know, "That image made me want to know more about Obama, and made me want to find a reason to be in his corner."

MS. BERMAN: That's amazing.

MR. FAIREY: And so -- yeah. I think that, for that reason, you know, it did convert a lot of people. And then those people, they talked to their friends, and you know, it's a snowball effect that's created. And I'm certainly not saying that, like, you know, the poster set off a chain reaction that's the whole reason Obama is President, or anything like that. I think, you know, Obama is amazing. I'm not an Obama worshipper, I'm not perfectly happy with everything he's done or doing.

But I -- you know, I do think that, you know, there is this sort of cycle of reinforcement that kept, you know, perpetuating itself, that people liked the sticker because they liked Obama, and then they liked Obama even more because they liked the sticker and they shared the ideas with other people, and it was a great, very, very useful symbol, you know, a tool to symbolize how people felt, and then they could elaborate. So --

MS. BERMAN: Do you think that some of it -- in addition to the, like -- to the image itself, the way it showed up, you know, in multiples, and that it was all over the place, and that you might see it in an unexpected way, do you think that sort of also added to it, sort of this idea like, "I need to find out more about this," it's --

MR. FAIREY: Yes. I think the grass roots dissemination of the image made a huge difference, and that's why Scott Goodstein from the Obama campaign didn't want to co-opt the "Hope" image for the campaign --

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. FAIREY: -- because he didn't want to take away that authentic grass roots side of it, the magic of that.

I think so many people have -- you know, the Noam Chomsky phrase, "Spectator Democracy"? So many people have felt like powerless spectators in democracy. And then when they see something that makes them maybe feel like it's not a waste of time to try to participate, they can make a difference, that's incredible. That's so powerful. And I do think that the ways in which the image was showing up helped to reinforce that idea that democracy is for everyone, it's not just for the powerful.

And so, you know, I did my best to keep that going. And that's why we felt that the manifesto BART [ph] shows were so important, and having the bands play, and feeling like, you know, this culture of participation and, you know, being civically minded was something we had an opportunity to push that idea.

MS. BERMAN: Can you talk a little bit about the manifesto shows in Denver and in D.C.?

MR. FAIREY: Yeah, sure. The -- you know, I have to give Yosi a ton of credit for coming up with the idea for the shows, and you know, saying to me, "Can you help get people on board," which I was more than happy to do. I already had a relationship with MoveOn.org, I had done some logos for them, I was friends with the communications director. They wanted to help out.

They -- you know, Laura Dawn from MoveOn is friends with Moby. You know, I'm friends with DJ Z-Trip. We -- Yosi, you know, knew -- I'm friends with Death Cab for Cutie. We just pooled our resources and wanted to get as many great artists and musicians and good people together for an event. And we knew that everything at the Democratic Convention was probably going to be pretty square, and so we thought, well, you know, it should be cool too, to do this stuff. It should be -- it doesn't have to be like, "Oh, you know, my civic duty is a drag." It could -- it can be woven into the things in your life you enjoy.

And so, you know, we got a lot of great artists together. We got some outdoor -- we got a warehouse space that was inexpensive, we got artists to come in and do installations. We created an online contest for people to submit stuff. We had several different artists who juried the submissions, we also did a call for submissions from people that we knew were already making great work. And you know, there ended up being, I think, around 200 artists in the show from all over the place, you know, people who were making hand-stenciled spoke cards of Obama for, you know, messengers to put in their track bike spokes in Kansas City, Missouri, to, you know, really big artists in New York and LA. And we really wanted that breadth of, you know, of content and, you know, I guess, you know, emerging people with developing skills and people who were very technically proficient.

And, you know, we had a really great -- we had DJs in there every day. We had people from KCRW out here, and people -- you know, people from all over the place, locals from Denver. And then we had a -- we closed down the block, we got all the permits and stuff and we closed down the block and we had Death Cab for Cutie, Z-Trip, Zoe Deschanel. Who else? Cold War Kids -- oh, man. A lot of good people play.

And then, when we did the same thing around the inauguration, we -- oh, and the themes for the show were, you know, support Obama, you could make an Obama image. We didn't want it to all just be like total sycophantic Obama worship.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. FAIREY: So we did -- we also had the themes of workers rights and universal health care and protecting the environment and green energy and technology.

So, people made fantastic images around all those themes. And when we did the inauguration show in D.C., you know, we put more emphasis on the -- you know, those themes of service, you know, "Ask what you can do for your country, not what your country could do for you" type thing, the green energy technology, universal health care, and SEIU was a sponsor with it. And we all believe in, you know, worker's rights anyway, but that was a strong emphasis. And we had Moby perform, we had De La Soul perform, Santo Gold perform.

And over the course of the few days that we had the show up in Georgetown, we had something like 80,000 -- they were tracking it with a clicker -- something like 80,000 people come through, everybody from, you know, movie stars like Jessica Alba and Joaquin Phoenix and Casey Affleck to Arnold Schwarzenegger, you know. So many -- Michael Stipe from R.E.M. was -- spoke on one of the nights.

MS. BERMAN: I think I saw him speak.

MR. FAIREY: Yeah. It was -- you know, the --

MS. BERMAN: It was packed. I mean it was packed, packed.

MR. FAIREY: Yeah, the energy was amazing. And you know, I -- and then we even did a -- we did a book about all the art. And of course, in the book, you know, we were trying to be very, very democratic and show the breadth

of the kind of work that was submitted. And there is this one thing with Obama looking sort of like he's on the cover of a romance novel, wearing, like, an oversized, like a sort of white robe, and standing in water, and every single review of the book was like, "Yeah, here is this cheesy Obama worship image," you know, and that was like one out of -- you know, it's like I want to be inclusive, but I'm realizing that people just want to find the weakest link and, like, tear your thing up, you know?

So, you know, I regret that we included that image, even though what it was designed to do was show that --

MS. BERMAN: Who was the artist?

MR. FAIREY: I don't remember that artist's name. But to show that, you know, this amateur artist that probably wasn't, you know -- had never done anything that had activism as part of it had been inspired to do this, and that there is no one way to care and try to make something showing you care.

But, you know, by the time the book came out, only, you know, six or eight months after the election, the -- you know, all the good will had already dissipated. And, you know, I'm completely disillusioned with, you know, politics, the human race. I mean I'm -- whatever. I'm plugging away, doing my thing.

But, you know, there is things that motivate people, and one is enthusiasm and optimism and the other is revenge. I think I'm more motivated by revenge right now, that like, yeah, you can try to squash all of my desire to inhabit this planet and make -- and not make it worse, but make it better. You can try to take it all away, but you're not going to be able to, and I'm going to keep making art and being a thorn in your side by protesting social ills and injustice, and doing it in a way that hopefully is creative and inspiring.

I mean it's sad, though, to think that inspiration is now my form of revenge, rather than, wow, I know that this is like, you know -- this is the amazing beacon of light that will attract other lovely people that are like-minded. I don't feel that way.

MS. BERMAN: And this was sort of directly after the election.

MR. FAIREY: Yeah. I mean I've been feeling that way --

MS. BERMAN: [Inaudible] change.

MR. FAIREY: -- for almost two years. I mean ever since -- the lawsuit started about -- just a few days after the inauguration.

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MR. FAIREY: And, you know, that was already -- that was like -- that created a big black cloud in my life. And then just watching how the right wing is so -- FOX News, a lot of the politicians -- I mean honesty has very little place in politics, I've noticed. To see that Sarah Palin will say "death panels." And I know that she's stupid, but I think she knows better, and she's still saying it, knowing that it doesn't matter.

You know, Boehner, Mitch McConnell, all -- these are evil people who -- great, there is not jobs out there in the world, but that people are loving that they are stoking hate, and being part of it, and submitting to it, I'm so depressed about it. But, you know, I --

MS. BERMAN: How has it affected your work? You know, it was a move for you -- you know, working on the Obama image seems like it was full-time job, you know, and that you were putting so much effort and time and energy into it. How did this sort of shift afterwards affect your work?

MR. FAIREY: Well, you know, directly after the election, I already had on the schedule, from before I even made the Obama poster, that I was going to be doing the solo Museum show at the Boston ICA. So, luckily, I didn't have a ton of time to, you know, to, I guess, lament the high of the Obama thing coming down. You know, I was busy. So on to my museum show, and then that -- in Boston, and then that traveled to Pittsburgh, to the Warhol Museum, and then on to the CAC [Contemporary Art Center].

But, you know, I --

MS. BERMAN: And this was the Supply & Demand show?

MR. FAIREY: Yeah. And I -- you know, I have continued to make -- I knew that the world -- that Obama wouldn't be the magic bullet to fix the world. But I hoped that there would be a little bit more of an embrace for some of his very good ideas, ideas that, to me, if you reject them, you just want the world to be bad, you want global warming, you want destruction, you want very, very, very disproportionate allotment of resources, you -- and a lot of things that completely contradict Christian philosophies, yet are -- somehow Christians support. It's so

backward, it's so bizarre.

But, yeah, so I just continued to make work about what was going on in Darfur, Burma, or global warming, clean energy. Made a windmill poster that used the same color palette as the Obama poster, tried to get it -- the Obama Administration to take a look at it and maybe actually use it in some governmental, you know, capacity, that -- they were doing different programs around the recovery, new graphics about the recovery, and things like that.

And the lawsuit had started at that point, and I think basically what Yosi told me -- because Yosi ended up getting a job at the NEA, and then having to resign from that because Glenn Beck singled him out as like a manufacturer of propaganda.

MS. BERMAN: Wow.

MR. FAIREY: I think that the Obama Administration didn't get back to me on the windmill image because I was in a lawsuit over intellectual property, and, you know, anything controversial, they're not going to get near it, no matter how useful it could be.

And so, I just thought, okay, my hope that this would really be -- this, Obama being elected, and you know, this exciting swell of grass roots activism would translate into maybe a shift in the culture in Washington, just didn't happen. And I went inside-outside strategy. I just went right back to, well, screw it. I'm going to do it the way I've always done it, and isn't this disappointing? But I'm not going to let it paralyze me and, you know, stop me from doing the things that I think are important.

MS. BERMAN: So -- and so, these same sort of images, you know, the cause behind them, some of them you were doing on the fine art side of things, and some you were also doing for, you know, your graphic design side of things, too. So it was really kind of all in --

MR. FAIREY: Yeah. I mean, like, for example, with -- in the Aung San Suu Kyi image, I made posters and stickers which were directly donated to several, you know, organizations that were getting stuff into Burma, and I also sold those things to give them cash donations, and I made fine art, which then I sold myself, and that's how I sort of recouped the money for me and then, you know, put the work in front of another audience.

And so -- but, you know, my design firm, sometimes we all, when we have down time, we work on things -- I mean there is a -- it's either -- sometimes it's pro bono, stuff we've done for Darfur, or there is something that we do really, really just as cheap as possible, so that we can -- because since the economy crashed, we don't have a lot of buffer time and money. But we did -- you know, we did, Participant did a film called Oceans, and you know, it's -- we think it's a good cause to take care of the oceans, so we did a poster for that super, super low-budget. And, you know, like \$5 an hour for the studio kind of budget.

But all that stuff is important to me. I have said that -- a lot of times -- that the success of my clothing line and my art career has meant that I have a lot more freedom to do charity stuff, create -- make time to make images I won't make any money from, or -- or that I will only make money on fine art from, but not any other, you know, merch.

And I also -- my clothing line -- through the clothing line we do the awareness program, and all the profits go to causes. And so I'm trying to utilize my design for my fine art career, my network of people I can get stuff out to through my website, and you know, use all that to benefit things I care about, and to make pictures I want to make to get the word out.

To me, there is -- you know, everything comes together in a way that is harmonious and positive in that equation, and yet still people find a way to criticize it, saying, like, "Oh, you know, his art career is all about, like, he just wants to look righteous by jumping on these causes, and then that raises the value of his fine art," as if it's like I don't actually care about these things, it's just a marketing thing. But to me, you know, it's pretty bullet proof. And there's plenty of artists that sort of operate in their -- you know, in the fine art world bubble, and they do great, and they don't -- you know, there is a small group of people that what they do benefits. And, you know, I'm not saying that that's wrong, I'm just saying that I read the newspaper, watch the news, and you know, I feel like I need to make images that address stuff outside of just the fine art world realm.

And you know, that's -- yeah, so that's -- it's a choice. I don't do it because I want people to say, "Oh, well, aren't you Mother Teresa," or whatever. That's not it. It's a choice. I do it because I want to. Sometimes it is frustrating, when I'm a little over-committed and I feel like, "Oh, man, these people need this image, it's a great cause, I wish I could back out of it because I am so busy, but I will be letting them down, and you know, I said I'd do it, and I always do everything I say I'm going to do," but you know, sometimes my wife gets mad -- Amanda gets mad, too, because she feels like I'm spread too thin. But, you know, that's what I want to do, that's what I choose to do.

MS. BERMAN: And is there anything else that you are looking for, like, that you want to do, you know, in the immediate future, that you haven't -- I mean, I think your list of projects is pretty long. But is there anything that you are, like, dying to get -- you know, you don't even have to explain it. But you're dying to start doing, or moving in a different direction, or --

MR. FAIREY: Well, no. I think I am interested in decreasing -- which has already started -- my -- the amount of time I am spending managing this design agency, which I -- you know, I enjoy doing sometimes -- sometimes it's stressful -- but focusing on my own art. And whether that, my own art, is applied to fine art, street art, my clothing line, some philanthropic cause, but just things that are important to me, personally, that aren't for a client.

Now, every now and then, something comes along that I think is both, you know, a great-paying commercial job, and something that I'd want to do anyway. And that's why, you know, when people say, "Oh, yeah, you know, pure art is this, and commercial art is that," there's no absolutes. And I -- doing the Led Zeppelin "Greatest Hits" album cover, "Mother Ship," or the Walk the Line poster for the Johnny Cash film, or the work for Tom Petty that I have been able to do, these are all projects where this is art -- I admire those people, it's great to collaborate with them, those are projects I would want to do anyway. But it also just happens to have a budget. They're going to use it for album packaging or a movie poster. But then I always make part of the deal that, if I like the image I make, I get to make fine art with it.

And so, you know, I enjoy that. But really, those projects are the exception, not the rule. And I will always continue to take on projects like that when they are presented to me, because I will be helping to promote people I like, and you know, and my work will be associated with it. But you know, as much as possible, working on my own art and spending time making pieces that I think can have -- you know, all the best art, in my opinion, is timely and timeless. It's -- because humans make the same mistakes over and over and over again. But there might be a way of addressing that that makes sense. In the moment it feels very relevant, yet it's probably something that's going to -- has been an issue in the past, and won't continue to be an issue in the future.

The Second Amendment Solutions print was -- I had already started it before the shootings in Arizona, and then I was like, "Time to finish it and get it out right now." And, you know, that's not going to be the last time gun control is an issue and somebody gets shot, or multiple people get shot when -- you know, and it's tragic. So, you know, I -- making that image, rather than making a portrait of Gabby [Gabrielle] Gifford[s], I think, was the way to go because that's an image that -- it will be relevant, it will endure.

And so, I'm trying to think about how to make things that I think are, you know, are going to hold up in, you know, 10, 20, 50 years, whatever. And, you know, because one of the things that's been so exciting about street art is that it's -- you know, it's in the public, people see it, it makes an impact, but it's also so ephemeral. Now that I have a lot of -- the ability to publish books or have my stuff seen widely on the Internet or in magazines, the -- you know, the idea of how to make really, really great art pieces that will hold up not just when graded on a curve, because -- "Well, it's really good for graffiti, or for street art," but it's just good, you know, that's important to me.

It doesn't mean that I -- you know, I'm going to start getting, like, fussy and doing six-month-long oil paintings or anything. But I guess what I'm talking about is the logical progression of finding ways to get the work out there, and recognizing the balance between quantity and quality that you need in, you know, a culture with such a rapid metabolism that, you know, yet in the end likes to, you know, say, "Okay, but this one's a classic, so I want it to be a reference point." And, yeah, and there has to be -- it has to have enduring merit. So, you know, those are the variables I am considering.

MS. BERMAN: Well, thank you so much. This has been really, really great.

MR. FAIREY: Cool.

MS. BERMAN: Okay, perfect.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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