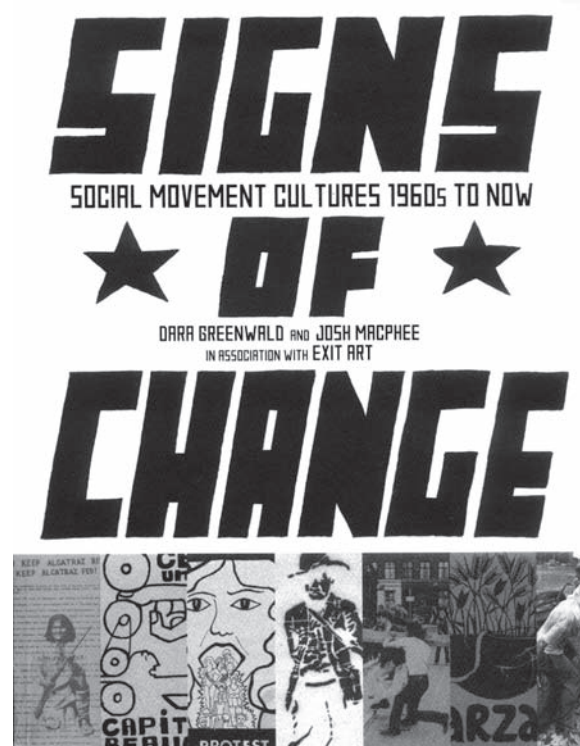


Comic & Zine Reviews

Mark Pawson

I first went to an exhibition at the independent cultural centre/gallery Exit Art in New York in the early 1990s when they were located on Broadway in Soho, and each time I've visited New York since I've made a point of checking out their exhibitions and always been rewarded. In November 2008 I went along to their current location on 10th Ave, at 36th St. on the west side of Manhattan in Hells Kitchen, just above Chelsea, to see the *Signs Of Change: Social Movement Cultures 1960s To Now* exhibition. It was an enormous show of original posters, leaflets, flyers, photographic documentation, banners, stickers and other ephemera created by self-organised activist and protest groups from around the world, curated by Dara Greenwald and the indefatigable Josh McPhee. The exhibition was hung from waist level to high up on the walls and completely filled the Exit Art warehouse-sized space with over 1,000 items. It took me a couple of hours to get around and look at everything. I was vaguely aware of other groups of visitors coming and going whilst I was there, and noticing that I'd been there so long one of the Exit Art directors thoughtfully came over to have a chat.



For me, *Signs Of Change* was a perfect exhibition, with exhibits encompassing events I'd been directly involved in, with flyers for Critical Mass bike rides. Events I knew quite a lot about: Paris '68 posters, Reclaim The Streets and the M11 road protests. Protest groups I'd heard of but knew little more about: AIM, the American Indian Movement; Autonomia Femminista, demanding wages for housework in 1970s Italy. And also plenty of issues I'd never heard about, including Japanese Farmers' ongoing protests against Narita Airport, and a 1980 uprising in Gwangju, South Korea. It was obvious from the scope of the show what a massive undertaking researching and collecting the exhibits must have been; most items were extremely ephemeral, would only have been in circulation for a short period of time and were likely to be discarded or destroyed soon afterwards. An exhibition like this really deserved a catalogue but none was available, so as best I could I scooped up a handful of flyers and information leaflets instead.

I was happily surprised two years on to see a *Signs Of Change: Social Movement Cultures 1960s To Now* catalogue, published in Autumn 2010, put together by the curators Greenwald and McPhee. The book manages to cram in images of over 350 of the exhibits. Organised into thematic sections - Struggle for the Land, Agitate! Educate!

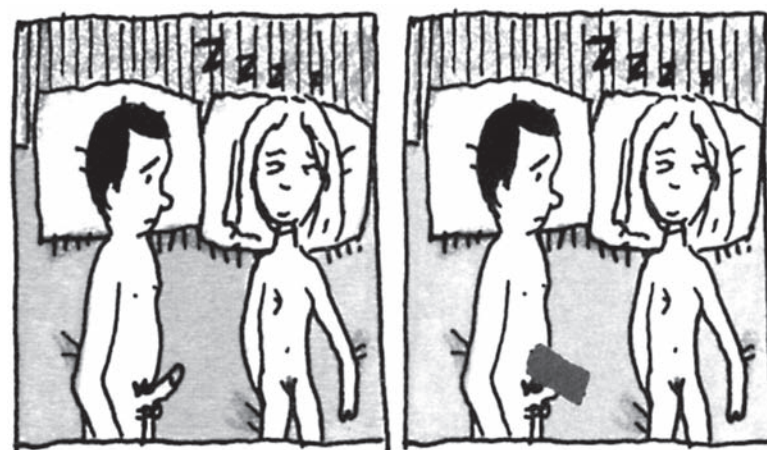
Organize!, Forward to People's Power, Freedom and Independence Now, Let It All Hang Out, Reclaim The Commons and Globalization From Below - the book includes materials documenting 55 social movements from 25 countries, together with essays and lists of the films and videos shown at Exit Art. If you didn't see the exhibition in New York or one of the three other US cities it toured to during 2009 and 2010, and if you're not too busy flyposting, making placards or shopping for a new black hoodie, you should pick up a copy of *Signs Of Change: Social Movement Cultures 1960s To Now* as soon as possible.

And if anyone from Exit Art is reading, here's my personal wish list of Exit Art exhibitions I've seen that really deserve accompanying publications: *Counterculture: Alternative Information from the Underground Press* (1996), a wonderful exhibition which was similar in size, scope and installation methods to *Signs Of Change*; *Alternative Histories: A History of Alternative Art Spaces in New York City since the 1960s* (2010). Thank you.

David Heatley's original *Deadpan* comic was reviewed in this column a couple of years ago, so when a compilation of his work, *My Brain Is Hanging Upside Down*, was published in the UK by Jonathan Cape I didn't rush out and buy a copy, smugly knowing that I had much of his work in the original format. When I did finally pick up a copy of this handsome, beautifully produced collection, I was shocked to discover that even though there's an 'Adults Only!' warning on the cover many of the comic strips have been censored. In the 16 page 'Sex History' story, illustrated in a loosely-drawn style, almost all the teeny-tiny genitalia have been blocked from view with several hundred small square panels! Using my special censor's ruler I can inform you that a drawing of a penis measuring 4.5 x 1 mm has been hidden from view - which only serves to draw more attention to it. In an 'Adults Only!' publication which you'd have to be trying really hard to find erotic or arousing, this is both silly and pointless. Examine the two panels reproduced here, slightly enlarged and decide which you prefer. Oh I forgot to mention that this censor hasn't been using the usual black felt tip pen, but has been making deletions with a day-glo pink highlighter pen, using hot pink ink to hide minuscule tumescent genitalia. Do we now have a new type of knowing ironic censorship? Shiny happy censors having fun?

There's also a French language version of *My Brain Is Hanging Upside Down* which I'd like to believe is uncensored, if only to perpetuate a stereotypical view from repressed Britain of a sexually liberated France. But I can't tell if this is the case just from closely examining the online images at amazon.fr and unfortunately the *Variant* research budget doesn't stretch to buying a copy.

Self-censorship has always been an issue in



autobiographical comics, with artists having to strike a delicate balance between washing their dirty laundry in public and having family and friends who will still talk to them. Usually this happens at the editing stage, before publication and David Heatley does this himself a couple of times in panels showing his wife.



Isabel Greenberg takes this process a stage further in *The Summer Of Boundless Optimism*, the most recent of her visual diary, which covers her leaving art college, looking for a job and moving to fashionable East London. In my copy, three half pages have been chopped out after the booklet has been printed; it's post-publication editing. Instead of faffing about crossing things out with black felt tip pens, Isabel has grabbed a sharp knife and made neat excisions on selected pages. It's impossible to tell what's been removed: Embarrassing behaviour? Shameful drunkenness? Compromising positions? Fashion mistakes? Shoplifting a lasagne sandwich from Tescos? We can only speculate. Whilst I feel slightly swizzed by the loss of pages, I'm fascinated by the continuing, physical editing process. Will copies of *The Summer Of Boundless Optimism* with even more sections removed become rare and collectable, is there a price premium for the authors indecision?

Car Boot Sale by Richard Hogg, screenprinted in black with sparingly used spot colours, is a carefully observed, precisely drawn visit to his ideal car boot sale; a fantasy very slightly removed from the grubby reality of most. We meet the stallholders early on a Sunday morning as they neatly set out their goods and tend their stalls. The book takes us on a walk round the car boot sale, meeting familiar-seeming characters: Mr Old

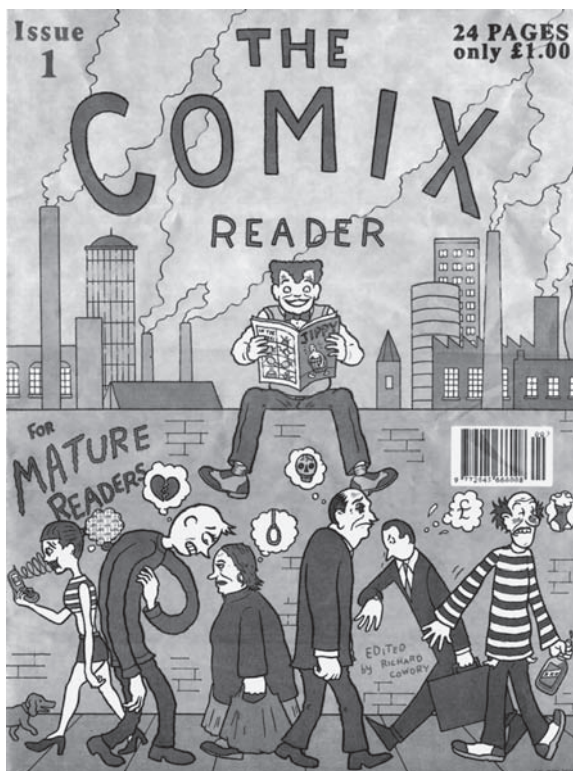
Woodworking Tools, The Book Man, Mrs Retro Homewares, Mysterious African Artefacts Lady, and the Star Wars Action Figures Afficionado. Curiously, there aren't any tables full of envelopes and paper purloined from the office stationery cupboard, or stalls selling cheapo lighters and bottles of bargain bleach. We leave the car boot sale just after midday as the stallholders are wrapping unsold ornamental plates in newspaper and folding up their wallpaper paste tables. This is an exemplary artists book, examining a familiar but uncelebrated feature of life in the UK, delightfully presented and with a clear purpose. I'd be overjoyed to find a copy of *Car Boot Sale* at a car boot sale, but sad that someone had discarded it.

Back in 1996 when *Variant* relaunched in its newspaper format it was difficult to find printers with the specialist printing presses able to print onto continuous rolls of newsprint who would take on what they probably saw as a small fiddly job. Things have changed a lot over the intervening 15 years and now due to advances in digital print technology, together with the ease and minimal cost of transferring digital files, it's easier than ever before to get your own publication made in a newspaper form. There's currently a whole new wave of artists, designers and publishers taking advantage of this accessible format with large pages and affordable full colour printing.

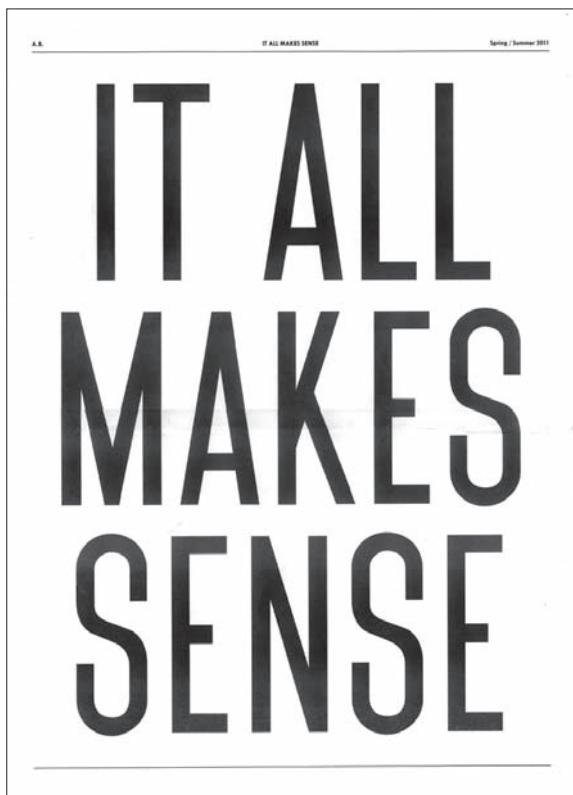
The *Comix Reader* edited by Richard Cowdry was inspired by his visit to an exhibition of 1960s underground comix at the ICA in London and aims to echo some of the energy, excitement and joyous freedom of expression present in those early underground comix. The 24 page *Comix Reader* has contributions from 22 artists, who get an entire page to themselves, and I assume that the important editorial and financial issues were decided at the group's monthly pub meetings in central London. The quality of the work included is pretty good and *Comix Reader* only costs £1. They printed an ambitious 9,000 copies with production costs and distribution duties shared between all participants, and just as important as making a great publication they've provided an inspiring model of a democratic method of publishing. *Comix Reader* issue 2 is due out very soon.

Illustrator Andy Smith's 12 page newspaper *May Fade In Direct Sunlight* showcases a dozen of his silkscreened poster designs, which is quite a generous gesture seeing as the original prints were priced at £30-40 each. The trompe l'oeil cover is a wry comment on the broadsheet newspaper format.

Designer Anthony Burrill fills each page of *It All Makes Sense* with a single large image. It has a blog feel to it; mixing commercial artwork, sketchbook pages, favourite books and records, childhood snapshots and his print and poster designs. Accompanied by brief explanations of each page's contents, *It All Makes Sense*.



Penguin Books don't normally come within the scope of this column, but tidying up the bookshelves recently I placed two recent Penguin Books on design, Bruno Munari's *Design As Art* and Deyan Sudjic's *The Language Of Things*, next to each other and was puzzled as to why two books



bought at the same time and both read once were in widely different condition. The Bruno Munari book had a small tear on the front cover, knocks, bent corners, a discoloured spine and the edges of the pages were fanning out, in contrast the Deyan Sudjic book which was in near-mint condition and could have easily been placed back in a bookshop without anyone noticing. Both books are exactly the same size and have the same number of pages, but upon closer inspection and much page stroking differences became apparent, *Design As Art* is slightly thicker and feels like it's printed on coarser paper. *The Language Of Things* benefits from the addition of a matt laminated finish to the cover, making it structurally stronger and more resilient. Of the two it's Bruno Munari's *Design As Art* which I'll hold on to and re-read, so it's puzzling and infuriating that the publishers should choose to reprint this title, which first appeared as a Pelican Book in 1971, and deem it worthy of being labelled a Modern Classic, yet use materials which will probably make it look 40 years old in a year's time.



Contacts

Signs Of Change
www.exitart.org
www.akuk.com

My Brain Is Hanging Upside Down
www.davidheatley.com

The Summer Of Boundless Optimism
www.isabelnecessary.com

Car Boot Sale
www.hogg.com
www.nobrow.net

Newspapers
www.thecomixreader.com
www.asmithillustration.com
www.anthonyburrill.com
www.newspaperclub.com

Penguins
www.penguin.com