Description

How do we recognise fascism? With the march of right-wing populism across the globe, this question besets the contemporary moment, but it equally preoccupied politically engaged American artists in the postwar decades. As the left and liberal centre currently interrogate what analogies or equivalences are ethically appropriate to make between fascism and, for instance, the January 6th assault on the Capitol, without evacuating the term of meaning or specificity, this project asks what can be learned from turning to politicised art of the immediate postwar years in America. America and the Allies defeated European fascism in 1945 and until the rise of the New Right in the 1980s, the intervening decades in America were putatively defined by a liberal consensus. And yet, many American artists during this time mobilised the trope and iconography of 'fascism' to describe and oppose what were perceived to be a variety of authoritarian regimes of white supremacy, male dominance, militarism, and state violence.

This project explores why fascism was so viable as a source of comparison for multiple artists and political causes during these decades; its primary objective is to challenge assumptions that American artists engaged with fascism as a European ideology, as a threat from overseas, by uncovering responses to so-called domestic fascist formations instead. The constructions of fascism in this project do not map onto an organised political party or far-right group per se, but were instead ascribed to a variety of political, cultural, social and economic injustices.

The project cuts across a variety of different media, communities and practices: from the campus press and underground newspapers germane to the counterculture and New Left; the graphic art of Black Panther Emory Douglas and funk assemblages of Ed Bereal which frequently aligned police brutality with fascism; to the performance work of Chicano collective Asco, which presented the disenfranchisement of their communities as a consequence of the imperialist machinations of fascism. Other artists, such as Nancy Spero, Peter Saul and Leon Golub produced work which invoked Nazi iconography to renounce the Vietnam war, often constructing fascism as an export from America to South-East Asia in their practice. Feminist artists also used the discourse of fascism to critique the quasi-totalitarian operations of patriarchy, such as Anita Steckel's 'Hitler' series (1978). Conversely, some artists directed the term towards features of feminism itself, such as Hannah Wilke's work, 'Beware of Fascist Feminism' (1977), which rebuked the 'censorship' of women's bodies in feminist art. The project will also offer the first sustained treatment of the No!Art group, whose spokesperson, the Lithuanian-American Boris Lurie, made provocative comparisons to the Holocaust in his work to reject art's commodification at mid-century. Fascism was also a reference point for art engaging with the emergence of the prison-industrial-complex, specifically the Attica prison riots, such as Rupert Garcia's screen-print 'Attica is Fascismo' (1971).
Method

The part of the project to be completed this summer is the section using the campus press, radical publishing and underground newspapers germane to the counterculture and New Left during the 1960s and early 70s. The intention is to use a) the online, searchable collection Independent Voices on JSTOR https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.sussex.ac.uk/site/reveal-digital/independent-voices/ b) the Mai 68 collection at the Keep archive, Falmer, Brighton, https://www.thekeep.info/collections/getrecord/GB181_SxMs97 and the Small Press Collection at UCL, London https://www.ucl.ac.uk/library/special-collections/a-z/little-mags

The JRA will use these collections and identify visual and verbal references to fascism and, if appropriate, record each article/image in Zotero as a tagged entry, searchable at a later date.

Skills / experience required

Experience of or interest in using archival materials, including digital collections and on paper.

Knowledge of postwar US culture, activism and politics (1945-85)

Experience of using Zotero an advantage

Key readings

Matthew Israel, Kill for Peace: American Artists Against the Vietnam War (University of Texas Press, 2013).


Chris Vials, Haunted by Hitler: Liberals, the Left, and the Fight Against Fascism in the United States (University of Massachusetts Press, 2014).


Alberto Toscano, "Incipient Fascism: Black Radical Perspectives." CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 23.1 (2021): <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.4015>
**Learning Outcomes**

by the end of the project, the JRA will

- have improved their skills in archival research
- have experience of working collaboratively
- have a greater understanding of the iconography of antifascism in postwar US art and activist cultures pre-1985.

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