

## How to Tell the Difference Between Propaganda and Art

by [Seph Rodney](#) on August 5, 2016



The panel at the 'Art and Propaganda' talk, moderated by Hyperallergic's Hrag Vartanian, in conversation with Associate Professor of Art History and Museum Studies, Miriam M. Basilio; artist and half of Dyke Action Machine! (DAM!) Sue Schaffner, and artist Daniel Bejar (All photos courtesy of Smack Mellon Gallery, Brooklyn, NY, unless otherwise noted)

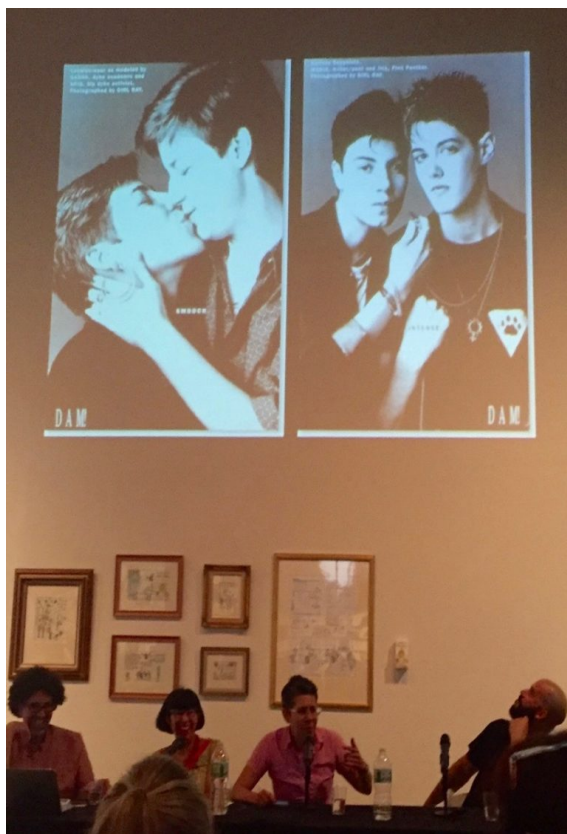
At a round-table discussion at Smack Mellon gallery, convened on July 27 by Hyperallergic and the gallery, and moderated by Hyperallergic's editor-in-chief Hrag Vartanian, the issue of the distinction between propaganda and art was in focus. Much of the artwork displayed in Smack Mellon's *Of the People* exhibition (which closed July 31) straddles the shifting line between the two discourses. Vartanian posed the question to the panel whether a hundred years from now would people looking back on this work and be able to tell whether it was one or the other.

One artist on the panel, Sue Schaffner, who is half of [Dyke Action Machine! \(DAM!\)](#), answered by proudly claiming that the work she does on behalf of DAM *is* propaganda, part of her political project to bring lesbians in the US to public visibility and recognition. Artist Daniel Bejar, who is part of the *Of the People* exhibition, similarly argued that the distinction was something he was trying to blur, essentially to

provoke awareness of the current cultural situation in which a great deal of what we see in advertising and political advocacy is already propaganda. By blending art and propaganda, Behjar contended that he was making it more possible for people to ascertain when we are being manipulated.



The artist Sue Schaffner discussing the work of Dyke Action Machine! (DAM!)



Sue Schaffner talking about how DAM operates in the arena of advertising (Photo by Angela Cruz for Hyperallergic)

Listening to this conversation, I flashed on an idea that someone shared with me years ago, that one can tell the difference between work that belongs to different genres by asking the question: would the industry or field likely produce the work in question. For example, sometimes the line between pornography and art is blurred. Consider Guido van der Werve's film, *The Present Moment*, which contains scenes of several couples having penetrative sex in a common room. One might regard the work as pornographic, but applying the above heuristic, I would conclude that this kind of film would never be produced by the pornographic industry (particularly the one oriented towards male heterosexuals) because the people involved are not hyper-feminized, the occasion for connecting to each other through sex is not as contrived as is typical for pornography, and the participants seem to genuinely enjoy each other. There are smiles and laughter and joy apparent in most of the participants' faces.

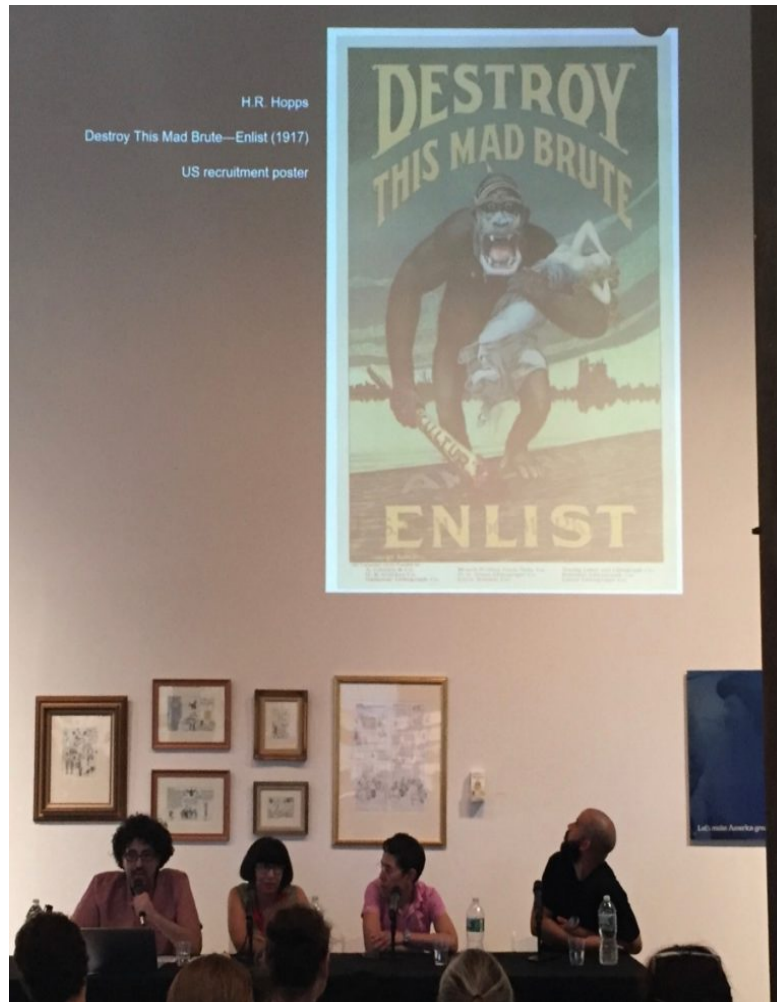


Daniel Bejar, "Rec-elections" (2016). (Courtesy of the artist and Smack Mellon, Brooklyn, NY)

A similar method of analysis could be applied to Daniel Bejar's piece "Rec-elections (Let's Make America Great Again, Isabel Gonzalez)" (2016) which uses Ronald Reagan's original 1980 campaign slogan "Let's Make America Great Again," co-opted by Donald Trump, in a lenticular print that layers the image of Puerto Rican activist [Isabel González](#) over the phrase. The piece asks the viewer to reimagine what greatness in the American idiom can look like: specifically, a Caribbean, Hispanic, woman activist. I doubt that the standard mechanisms for state sponsored propaganda could or would have produced such a work; it's too subtle and too demanding. It relies on didactic text and the willingness of the viewer to take the time to discover who Gonzalez was and what she accomplished. It's also unlikely that this work would



have been produced by the advertising industry, since it sells no identifiable product nor seeks to establish a relation that may be later exploited.



Vartanian discusses the intersection of overtly political propaganda and aesthetic strategies

Or take one of the projects of DAM! from a few years ago — [the Dyke Action Machine Incorporated](#) which ostensibly seeks to transform lesbianism into a marketable commodity. They have issued a pamphlet that claims their “Strategic Operating Areas” as: “Female Defense; Precision Engagement; Intelligence/Surveillance/Reconnaissance and Lesbian Branding.” Again, this kind of campaign would not be produced by a governmental agency, nor any corporation I can imagine — US or otherwise. I could see this work being developed by a comedic ensemble, but then, in terms of provoking political awareness comedy currently offers some of the most trenchant analysis we have. Rather it does what contemporary art — I should say *effective* contemporary art — does, which is plant small bombs of meaning that will detonate in some unknown time and place.

*The [Art and Propaganda](#) talk, co-presented by Smack Mellon and Hyperallergic took place on Wednesday, July 27. It was a discussion concerned with what differentiates propaganda from art and the role propaganda plays in raising social consciousness and awareness.*