

STEVEN HELLER

Logos do not exist in a vacuum and their power (or lack of it) is fueled by external forces. Logos are designed as reminders of a product or an idea, and the best logos act like time bombs, exploding the public's perceptions without warning.

The logo for the punk band Crass (1977–1984), designed by Dave King in 1977, does just that. It is explosive and memorable. He equates his design with the ubiquitous Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) logo, best known as the "peace sign," inspired by Bertrand Russell and designed in the UK by Gerald Holtom in 1958. The peace sign echoes an early Christian-era mark called the crow's foot and it became the primary ban-the-bomb protest symbol in the early 1960s. (Another origin story posits that the CND symbol is the combination of two semaphore signs for N and D, implying the crow's foot was a coincidence.) The symbol later evolved into the emblem for the emergent anti-Vietnam War peace movement and has retained its vitality for over 60 years. The Crass logo has a similar trajectory. It is a "peace symbol for punks," King told me. "In fact I discovered years later that the peace symbol nestles within the Crass one," he said.

In 1977 King originally designed the symbol for an agitprop pamphlet railing against the British church and state titled "Christ's Reality Asylum." Fifty copies were run off on a Gestetner copier. The type and logo were spray-painted on a gray cardboard cover using hand-cut stencils. "The design was specifically wrought to be stenciled," he explained, adding, "what lends it resonance I think is having a double-headed snake and the strong, negating diagonal at the heart." Later the same year the pamphlet's author, Penny Rimbaud, co-founded Crass and applied the mark as the band's symbol. "It fit neatly and dramatically on the bass drum," King said.

King's design deliberately takes chances with double-edged symbolic elements. An alternative version of the mythic ouroboros, a snake eating its own tail, is rendered as two legs of a sun-cross, intertwined with a symmetrical (Celtic or Christian) cross also commonly found in ultra right-wing emblems. In the war of ideological signs and symbols, this can be a confusing signal—but the result, like a vaccination, uses some of the disease to create immunity. This is why King's logo, like the peace sign, has achieved the transcendent status he very much wanted. King designed the Crass logo to attack the very

images it co-opts. The band advocated anti-fascist, anti-capitalist, anti-establishment, anarchic action, and King's work in general, through prodigious stenciling and spray-painting, is an antidote to the symbolic bombardment from the middle and far-right.

Although Crass disbanded in 1984 (a sly reference to George Orwell's dystopian novel) the polemical music is accessible for latter-day disaffected generations to discover. The symbol remained: It acquired a ubiquitous independence as a sign of protest—and became a very popular tattoo motif, too.

King continued to evolve variations on the original design. A few years ago for an exhibit in San Francisco, where King now lives, he resurrected the unused variations, adding as many new takes as he could. This book derives from that show, and other work is included which was made using stencil techniques. Many original cardboard stencils used for spray-painting are shown on the following pages.

In the 1980s, King mused on the similarities, not differences, between the US and USSR. His "Mickey Mouse as the hammer and sickle" stencil explored what a joint flag would look like if the countries ever merged!

King's visual critiques effectively employ familiar tropes in surprising juxtapositions, among them an arrow-like, streamline swallow, shot from a bow-like sickle; a robotic head with death-ray eyes under the title DESPOT; and the universal sign-symbol known as the running man, escaping from a maze of color forms. Each has a quality consistent with the stencil protest genre—they are graphically strong yet confounding and enigmatic.

Funny, powerful, articulate and impactful, King's graphics defy authority and continue the legacy of political and social commentary in the process.

Steven Heller is America's preeminent graphic design historian. He is the author, co-author or editor of over 180 books on the subject.