

Symbol by Dave King

In 1977, in the wilds of Essex, Dave King created a logo for his friend Penny's impassioned manifesto, "Christ's Reality Asylum."

In the intervening thirty four years, what became the Crass symbol has been emblazoned on records, flags, clothing and human bodies.

For the first time, the artist will exhibit original sketches for the logo, alongside alternate versions and contemporary "remixes."

Dave King now lives in San Francisco and continues to work on graphic art and photography projects.

The show is at the zine gallery and library Goteblud, 766 Valencia Street, San Francisco from November 5th to December 31st 2011.

goteblud.com

Interview by Matt Wobensmith, October 8, 2011.

MW: Dave, can you describe the origin of the symbol you created?

DK: It was originally done for a powerful rant that Penny Rimbaud was writing called "Christ's Reality Asylum." He asked me if I would do a logo to go with it, as my background was in graphic design. I read the piece, and it was clearly a heartfelt critique of organized religion and its inescapable reality in British society in particular, where there is no separation of Church and State. In every kind of school "Religious Instruction" was a mandatory class alongside Mathematics or Geography.

My first idea couldn't have been simpler really. Almost too simple. Alright, Christianity, we need a cross. Evil influence, let's have a snake. A single snake was placed as a strong, negating diagonal that traversed the cross from bottom left to top right, disappeared behind the cross and re-emerged in front again with just one snake head at the top. The snake itself formed a zig-zag, almost a lightning bolt. It looked good but not quite strong enough.

One of my favorite books was called "Japanese Design Motifs," which featured line drawings of Japanese crests, the kind of symbol a clan or family would use as a graphic identity on a flag or kimono. This book was published by Dover Books in 1972, but contained designs collected and first published in Japan in 1913. This same book is still in print today from the same publisher, and if I were ever to teach a class in graphic design, I would want to assign this book. You can learn so much from these designs. Some are symmetrical, some strangely asymmetrical, some are geometric, many feature birds, flowers and even vegetables. They can be incredibly complex at the same time as they are reduced to these iconic forms. The multiple variations are remarkable. There are over 4,000 designs in the book.

Anyway, using these crests as inspiration, many of which were contained in a square or a circle, and applying some of their design principles to the cross and the snake, ultimately led to the finished symbol. Following a symmetrical approach inevitably required that there be two snake heads and once that happened and the original diagonal was centralized, every thing locked into place and the thing practically began to spin.

The final, defining step was to make sure that the symbol could be stenciled.

DK: No part could touch any other. This was done principally so that Penny's manifesto, in a pre-punk D.I.Y. approach could be "homemade", with the text printed on a Gestetner copier and the title and symbol spray-stenciled onto a grey cardboard cover, then stapled together. Done!

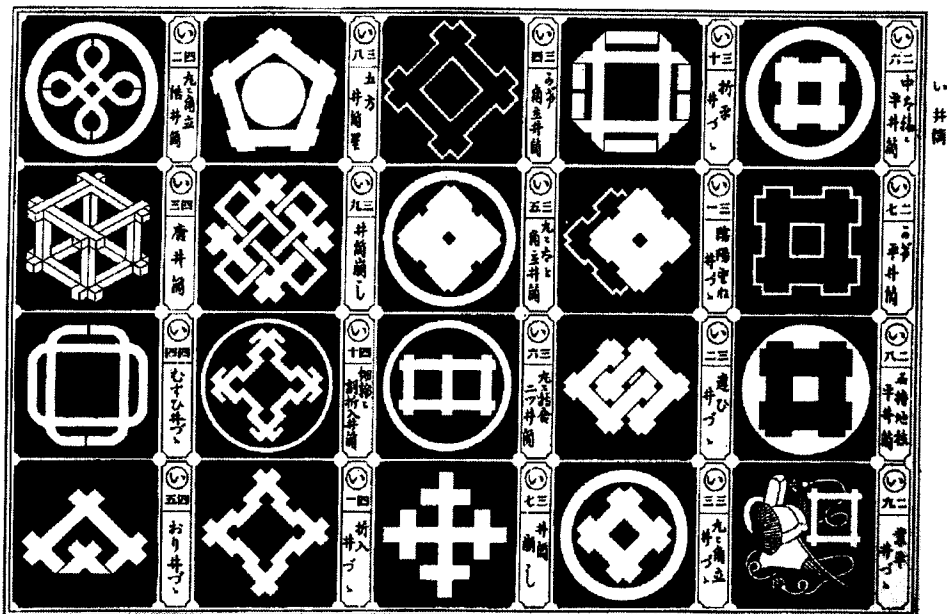
MW: When you added the snake, was it a conscious effort to create a Greek ouroboros, or was that incidental?

DK: Completely incidental. No, not intentional at all.

MW: Some people have also said that the logo incorporates a Union Jack and a swastika.

DK: The Union Jack was maybe semi-conscious. And the swastika - completely unconscious.

As far as the Union Jack goes, it's hard to get away from it. I also remember in junior school being taught how to draw the Union Jack - how to draw the flag. I remember being struck at the time that it was quite difficult to draw. The three crosses represent the flags of three united countries, but strangely the narrow, diagonal red cross does not line up from corner to corner. It takes a little figuring out. The Crass symbol is much simpler in many ways.



As far as the swastika, it never occurred to me, not for a long time afterwards, really. The only thing I can say is that I grew up a few years after the second World War and the swastika was represented everywhere in the media. You'd see it in endless kids' comic books that re-fought the war and on paperback thrillers in the local newsagent or at the train station. It was a prominent symbol for many years after the war. Even today really, in the U.K., it still appears on the covers of the same kind of popular novels, whereas in Germany, its use is legally restricted. So, it was like background noise, maybe, filtered in. It certainly wasn't designed in. At this time, the band didn't exist yet, so it wasn't a question of: "How could you make a symbol for a band that was going to critique fascist ideology?" There was no idea of taking a swastika and using it against itself.

MW: People projected their ideas of what it was onto the logo itself?

DK: Hard to say. I can't say what people project. Certainly if I were to look at it today, and knew nothing about it, and someone said - look, here's a swastika and here's this symbol - do they look similar? Well, I would say they both look kind of aggressive! (laughter).

Also, somebody once asked me if it was based on Celtic designs. Again my answer would be not consciously, although there were in the countryside around where I lived some old standing stones - original Celtic crosses that were basically a cross with a circle. The person who asked me was also thinking of the kind of interweaving of shapes (like the snake in the symbol) that you do you see in Celtic art but, again, it was not a conscious influence.

MW: I've never seen a symbol ever in pop culture or anything that is so anti-Christian. Have you?

DK: I don't think I have.

MW: Why have people adopted it?

DK: I think the fact that the band made it so central to their presentation. They had the idea that if the big corporations had their logos, why couldn't they have their own symbol in opposition that was just as strong and pervasive?

MW: Oddly enough, in doing so they've created a symbol that has all of the brand awareness of what Nike has to sneakers. The Crass logo is up there with other counterculture logos. Such brand recognition even today, it's somewhat ironic. When you see this symbol reproduced ad nauseum, what kind of feelings do you get?

DK: Well, I have somewhat neutral feelings. I think if I had been a Crass band member I might have stronger feelings. I'm not opposed to variations so much now. There were times when the symbol would get reproduced, and the tongue of the snake would be missing. I would think, "It's a snake - it has to have a forked tongue - how could it be left off?" The only thing that still bothers me is when it's drawn with some of the separate shapes touching, which renders it impossible to stencil. It has to be stencilable. But variation can make things interesting. I have grown to appreciate that. At this point I don't think the original symbol is really diluted or cheapened by multiple uses or indeed misuses.

MW: When you created this symbol, it was obviously a gift, and over the years you haven't asserted a copyright. Do you have feelings about copyrights?

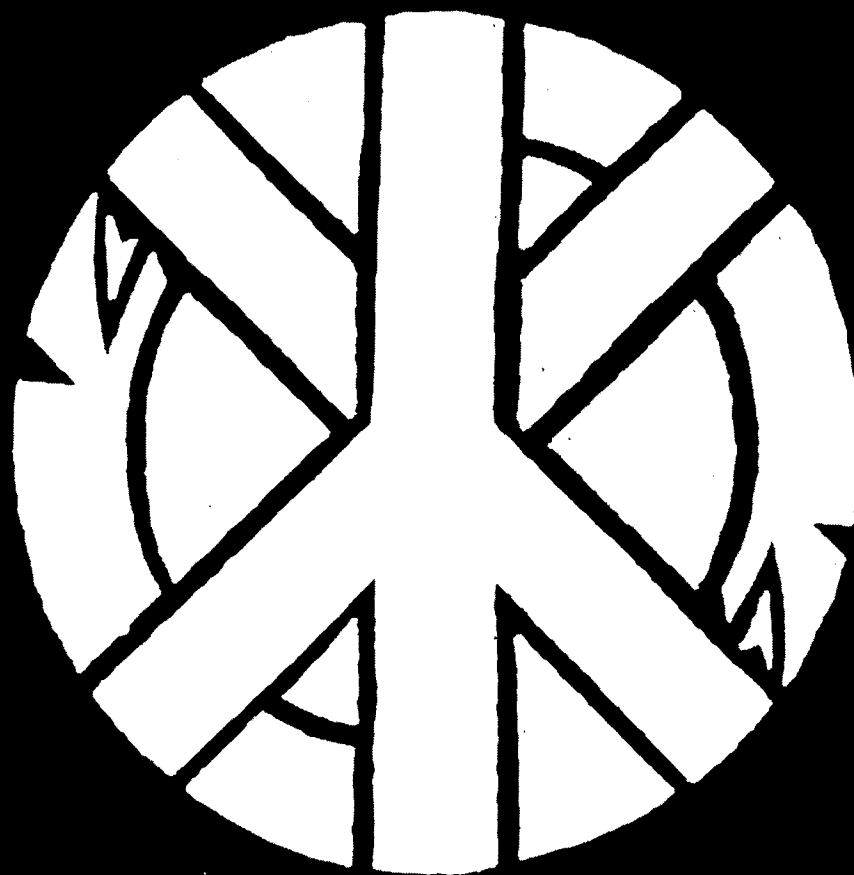
DK: Basically all artists have inherent, recognized rights to their own creations and actual copyrighting shouldn't be necessary. When the logo that was designed for the book was later adopted by the band, I don't know if they consciously wanted to make it anti-copyright so that anyone could use it. What came to be known as the Crass symbol just became so ubiquitous so quickly. People coming to the gigs would see it on flyers, on stage and of course it was on all the records. Almost immediately it was everywhere, not least on the fans' clothing. It was very accessible to anyone. I don't think you could have contained it if you wanted to.

MW: By virtue of its easy reproducibility?

DK: Yes. By anyone with a piece of cardboard, some kind of knife and a spray can. The individual parts of the symbol are pretty basic shapes.

MW: What if a major US sports gear maker like Adidas decided to make sneakers with it? How would it make you feel?

DK: I don't think I'd like to see that. Obviously it represents the band and also, I think, it belongs to the fans, however you define that word. If someone wants to stencil it on their jacket or go so far as to tattoo it on...



DK: ... their arm, then it's theirs, on their body. As far as it being used by an unrelated company, it doesn't really make any sense to me to have it represent anything else than what it already does. To me it wouldn't make sense for Adidas to use it. I don't know. I just associate it mostly with the band, very much with the period within which the band was operating. I don't think the symbol is particularly dated, though you can probably tell it was designed in the 70s. It doesn't look like it's from the 60s or 80s. But perhaps the fact that it has some classical elements, has kept it somewhat timeless.

MW: In a nutshell, you'd say that this symbol has become the embodiment of what Crass has done. Putting it on a sneaker would lessen its meaning, taken out of context - just the logo itself.

DK: This raises the crucial question, "Can the symbol be co-opted?" For better or worse we live in a media culture of appropriation, homage and mash-ups.

MW: I'm gonna say that I'd love to see it on Adidas sneakers, on iPhone cases, because I feel like the symbol itself - regardless of the band - it's so subversive. When Angelina Jolie wears it on a shirt she might be making a fashion statement - who knows - but the fact that it's this incredible indictment of Christianity, pushed into the face of middle America... I think that's what young people are gravitating towards. When they paint it on their jacket, they may or may not be Crass fans. I think it embodies anger and frustration over authority. There's almost nothing else to replicate their feelings. I think it almost cannot be co-opted. The symbol itself is inherently blasphemous. There's no way to reduce it in a way that would take away from the power of the symbol. Maybe this isn't relevant for the booklet.

DK: I don't know! (laughter)



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