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The Lost Art of the Campaign Poster Returns “Hope: A Collection of Obama Prints & Posters”

Interview with Hal Wert

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KENNEALLY: The campaigns of American presidential candidates over the years have been memorable for all manner of slogans, gimmicks, and attention-getting tactics. In 1964, the Johnson forces ran the so-called Daisy ad on television only once, but the point was made. Barry Goldwater, the President’s Republican opponent, was not to be trusted with nuclear weapons. Tippecanoe and Tyler Too proved short-lived as a piece of music. It was the official campaign song of the 1840 Whig pairing of William Henry Harrison and John Tyler. But it lives in everlasting memory as a slogan. Welcome to Beyond the Book. This is Christopher Kenneally, and we’re here today to talk about the 2008 Presidential campaign. I know, it’s a year later, but we’re still talking about that election because, of course, it was historic and memorable for the election of Barack Obama, the first African-American, to the nation’s highest office. In that regard, it is a unique event in American politics. But it is also notable, that campaign, for reviving the art of the campaign poster. With us today is Hal Wert, a historian specializing in political art, whose new book, *Hope: A Collection of Obama Posters and Prints* from Zenith Press in Wisconsin, documents this phenomenon. And he joins us today to discuss the fascinating story of how he acquired the various works and the rights to publish them. Welcome, Hal Wert.

WERT: Thank you, and it’s a pleasure to be here. Thank you for inviting me to be on Beyond the Book.

KENNEALLY: Well, we’re delighted to have you today, and let’s tell people just a bit more about your background, Hal, before we dive into this fascinating topic. For a number of years, Hal Wert has taught Prints of Persuasion, a course offered jointly by the School of Liberal Arts and the Printmaking Department at the Kansas City Art Institute. In that time, he’s acquired a huge number of slides, prints, and



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posters from various historical periods, and from a wide variety of countries. His collection has been seen in such shows as World War II Relief Posters and 20th Century US Campaign Posters from the Collection of Hal Elliott Wert. In September of 2008, Hal published a lavishly illustrated article in *Review Magazine* looking at *Barackstreet Art: Outsider, Hip-Hop, and Guerrilla: Unprecedented Poster Action for Obama*, and has written the foreword to a book written by well-known Chicago street artist Ray Noland, which is called *Ray Noland, Street Art Stories and Scenes on the Road for Obama*. Your last book, Hal, was *Hoover, The Fishing President* – what a great title – a portrait of a private man and his life outdoors that was chosen by the *Kansas City Star* as one of the top 100 books of the year in 2005. That book was finalist for the William Rockhill Nelson Award for Literary Excellence, and you earned your BA from the University of Iowa and an MA and PhD from the University of Kansas. And as we mentioned, you are a Kansas City resident.

So with all of that as background, Hal, we're looking today at this wonderful new book. It's a – overworked expression – lavishly illustrated, but I believe it really does apply in this case to this book. In fact, it even goes beyond the book to the cover itself. Maybe you can tell us about that later on. But the subject is what interested me, and from Copyright Clearance Center here, we always wonder about rights and acquiring works and so forth. And when I came across the book, which was being introduced to the world at Book Expo back in the spring, I was immediately attracted, apart from the interest visually, to the whole question of how you get these works together in a single collection. So let's start with, what made the Obama campaign so attractive in the first place to poster artists?

WERT: Well, I think the answer to that question is his ability, his rhetorical skills.

Probably the 2004 convention speech, followed by his books, which began to attract a lot of the left-of-center artists. And I think, too, his opposition, his strong opposition to the war in Iraq sort of fired up that community. And that community had not really been engaged politically since the 1972 McGovern campaign.

KENNEALLY: Well, let's just remind some people who might not even remember what you mean by 1972 or McGovern (laughter) to what was going on at that point. I mean, the McGovern campaign was kind of the last stand, if you will, of the radical anti-war Woodstock generation, right?

WERT: It was, and they really turned out – artists turned out – not as consistently as with the Obama campaign, and probably not as many, but there are at least 50 or 60 dynamite posters, many by – more by major artists than by street artists in '72, but just a plethora of really well-designed posters. And even though in other campaigns since then, there were a few for Clinton, and there were a few for Al



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Gore, and a few in 1904 for the Kerry campaign, but nothing that equaled the 1972 campaign until this Obama phenomenon started.

KENNEALLY: So in part, it was the man and his attraction to a certain group of artists who, as you mentioned, would be possibly left-leaning and be attracted to his message and so forth, but –

WERT: Yes, and you said, anti-war.

KENNEALLY: And anti-war, right, yeah. But this goes beyond politics, right? There's an ongoing graphic art movement that this connects to.

WERT: There is, and I point out in the book that several things came together to produce this phenomenon. One was the revival of letterpress and screen print, the printing in the 1980s for gig posters. So there's this revival of printing techniques across the US, some that occasionally took political form, but not very often, mostly gig posters. And that, along with the incredible new technology that's mastered by young people, and the excitement generated by Obama, those three factors came together to produce this phenomenon.

KENNEALLY: So there's a bit of the old, there's a bit of the new, and then there's this – and, admittedly, unique character of Barack Obama, who brings all of this together.

WERT: I agree. He's the catalyst.

KENNEALLY: Now when we think about the campaign posters of 2008, the one that everybody – almost everybody can see before them is the very famous Shepard Fairey poster of Hope, which itself has a story behind it that is now in court. But you really go well beyond the Shepard Fairey thing, and if it was only about Shepard Fairey, there wouldn't be a book. There are just so many artists that you cover here, so many different people from across the country. There are many artists of note who have created these, and there are some artists who nobody would have heard of in the first place.

WERT: Exactly. Some of the posters range from young people who are still in college and just starting in graphic art to established artists like Robert Indiana. But the Shepard Fairey poster, the minute I saw it, that was not the first poster that got my attention, but I would comment on that poster. I love that poster. I think it's very well done. But I was surprised, too, that so few people recognized the Russian constructivist kind of background to that poster, and the context that the Russian constructivism had been in, and particularly for Mao posters or Ho Chi Minh posters. And I was a little surprised at first that the Obama campaign warmed up to



it, because of those connections. But in spite of that, aesthetically, it's a beautiful poster, and as Shepard Fairey said, what's wrong with red?

KENNEALLY: Well, you mentioned Russian constructivism, and I actually find that an appealing type of art, not for the politics, but for the presentation itself.

WERT: Me too.

KENNEALLY: And I wonder whether, in fact, you've put your finger on something that's really important, and the ability of the new technology to appropriate and to disconnect from original sources. Any thoughts about that?

WERT: Yeah, absolutely. I think, in the art world, there's the kind of feeling right now – and maybe it's changing – that almost everything – you know, we take a look, conceptual art, environmental art, been there, done that. And appropriation has become a major style based on that idea that everything that can possibly be done has been done. But that's probably what I think is just a transitional period to a new hole opening up of style in the art world. And part of that was, going back – for Shepard Fairey, a part of that's going back and taking that very appealing, formalistic Russian constructivist style.

KENNEALLY: Right. And in the book, you talk about a whole number of art – how many different posters, how many different artists are collected in the new book?

WERT: The book has almost 100 different artists and we had to select from my collection. My collection's running about 400 posters right now.

KENNEALLY: I'm fascinated. Now how did you collect so many? How did you do that? Did you put out the word that you were open to people sending you this material? Did you go out and dig it up on the web? Did you walk the streets of our great country and –

WERT: Peeling them off at night.

KENNEALLY: Peeling them off of signposts. Exactly. How did you get –

WERT: You know, the guerilla artists were putting them up and I was right behind them, taking them down. No, I wish I'd be able to say that, but I didn't. The truth is that even though I'm an old goat, the new technology was the only way to get them. Almost all of them were only sold online and if you didn't get them through the websites at a particular time, often times the CPUs would overload and even though you were all ready to buy the poster, there was no way to do it. Then you'd



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have to deal with the flippers on the internet that raised the prices on them. And so I learned a lot about how to do that and how to get them quickly and then I would get in contact with the artist if they were sold out and ask if there were any APs or any misstrikes, that sort of thing. And people starting helping me. I also learned too that oftentimes, when people bought posters on the internet, they'd use their credit card and their credit cards would not clear and there would later be posters available.

KENNEALLY: Wow. So –

WERT: So I really learned to – and then you know, sometimes I would get – I got a little depressed at first because I knew this was going to cost me a lot of money, but when I saw that first Ray Noland poster that was on – you know, the Obama campaign headquarters in Des Moines, Iowa, in the 1907 – about November of 1907, close to –

KENNEALLY: You mean 2007.

WERT: Yeah, 2007. Did I say 1907? I'm sorry. In 2007. Just looked like a little ice cube and it was not clear then by any means that Obama was going to win the nomination, but on the front window of that little ice cube headquarters was this fabulous Ray Noland poster and it was called Coast to Coast and I had not seen that before and I thought, you know, there may be something going on here and Ray always signed his name CRO, which stands for Creative Rescue Operation, but Organization, but I didn't know that then. So I ran Ray Noland down on the internet and bought that poster. This is months before – a couple of months before the Shepard Fairey poster came out and Ray had already been out on the road. He was coming back from Denver and stopped in two cities in Iowa, one in Des Moines and one is Davenport and put up a few of those posters and then when the Shepard Fairey poster came out, I thought, you know, there's been nothing like this since 1972, I want to write about these, I want to get involved with these, and I better get on board and stay with it.

KENNEALLY: Well, we are grateful to you for taking on that assignment and I think history is going to be grateful to you for doing that. It is a fascinating story, but I'm interested in once you decided to create this book, pull this book together. So you've been collecting posters and this was just another subject to collect on at first. You didn't imagine a book I'm pretty sure.

WERT: No.



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KENNEALLY: But at some point you recognized, perhaps it was even before the election itself, but certainly by the election, you must have said, this is historic indeed and it's important to share with people this element of the campaign that people are going to be studying for as long as there's a United States.

WERT: I think they will and one of the really unique features, shortly after Shepard Fairey released the Hope and the Progress posters in January and February of 2008, it kicked off a deluge of posters and particularly the California crowd, people from Upper Playground in San Francisco, commissioned a series of 12 posters that came out over about a six or seven month period, all in limited screen print first editions, small numbers, usually no more than 200 posters and pricey, but they used the money – what's really interesting about this campaign is that Shepard Fairey, Upper Playground, others sold limited editions at high prices of beautiful screen prints but they took that money and produced cheap slappers and they shipped those slappers to Texas, to Pennsylvania through the primaries and none of this was officially part of the Obama campaign. So it's like two campaigns going on simultaneously.

KENNEALLY: Fascinating. And you just used a technical term that I –

WERT: A slapper.

KENNEALLY: A slapper. Tell me what a slapper is.

WERT: A cheap one that you can put up with paste and you can put – you know, they're cheaper to produce and you can produce them in large numbers.

KENNEALLY: That's what I thought you meant, but I wanted to be sure. With regard to the book though, so you decided that there was enough substance here to really make a book worthwhile.

WERT: Yes, it did. It started slowly. By May of 2008, there was a deluge of posters and people were jumping on board, the Obama campaign was picking up, he had done well on Super Tuesday, it looked like there was a real fight down in the convention. Obama had a brilliant strategy by picking up delegates and Democratic delegates in red states that he'd never carry in the general election that helped catch up with the more limited Hillary concentration on the big states and so the posters just kept coming out, coming out, and I thought, I want to write about these and then *Review Magazine* here in Kansas City gave me the first opportunity to do that and by that time, it was clear that there was a book there if I could just stay – if I didn't bankrupt myself, I could stay with it and write about them.



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KENNEALLY: And so the article in *Review*, which I mentioned in the introduction, kind of put your stake in the ground and then once you had a book proposal together and were able to sell that to Zenith, you then had another assignment, another hill to climb, Hal, and that was to get everybody's permission to allow you to use their work in the book.

WERT: It was difficult, but let me say too, my agent was good. When I planned the book, and I began to plan it in June with my agent Fred Hineson (sp?) in Washington, DC. I told him, I said I want this book to be a deluxe edition. I want the cover to fold out into a full poster. I want gate folds, I want bells and whistles and we went to four or five publishers and from day one, Zenith was excited about it. And in the final analysis, they took it and we signed the contract on April 1st of 2009 with a deadline of May 15th.

KENNEALLY: Incredible. Well, let me ask you though, so you had weeks, literally weeks to get the permission of all of these dozens of artists.

WERT: I did.

KENNEALLY: To include their work. How did you do that and what was their response?

WERT: Yeah, let me back up just quickly. Robert Hineson (sp?) who is my research assistant and a very good photographer, when we made the book proposal, we had already shot all of the posters at 600 PPI or better that went with the proposal, which of course cut down cost for Zenith but let them really see what was available and the only way that could have been done is if I'd collected those posters. I didn't have to round them up. Well, then we had seven weeks for me to write the book, which I put in about truthfully, 18, 19 hours a day, seven days a week for that period and part of that was getting the permissions and the response from the artists was overwhelmingly yes, and I would send them an email. It was all done electronically, just like the collection was basically put together electronically and I'd send them an email, tell them what I was doing, who I was going to publish with, ask them for permission and only one person I contacted told me no.

KENNEALLY: May I ask, you don't have to identify the person, but what was the reason for declining?

WERT: The only thing that was said is this image is not presently available.



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KENNEALLY: And what's interesting here of course is that well, it wouldn't be surprising that somebody would say yes, because with a political poster, you want as many people as possible to see it, whoever the candidate is.

WERT: Exactly, and this gives all of the artists a chance to showcase their work and particularly the younger artists because most of the posters are dynamite. And then too I had a battle with Zenith at first which was interesting and they finally decided I was right, but I wanted to go not with any of the standard posters that had been seen before. I always call those sort of graphic power outages. I wanted to go with the new and a little with the edgy sort of material, like the Matt Dye poster with Obama extended, where he's jumping out of a 1963 pimped Kennedy assassination limo with a great big pistol, in a leisure suit, smoking a cigarette.

KENNEALLY: It's a very jarring poster.

WERT: And it confronts that issue head on. And with the idea that you can't do that, Obama's invulnerable to that sort of thing, but there was a lot of tension about that and then the poster too that I like so much that came from San Francisco that says Inhale to the Chief and those are from Obama supporters who are arguing for legalized marijuana. So there's some iffy, edgy posters in here and I wanted to go with both edgy, political ideas and edgy, new graphics.

KENNEALLY: Well, that is something I wanted to ask you about. First of all, graphically speaking, and I'm looking at a collection of these online that we will link to from Beyond the Book, graphically speaking, they are all over the lot. Some kind of fall within that very much agitprop tradition –

WERT: They do.

KENNEALLY: But then there's something that I think – what I find one of the more interesting and attractive ones, it's the Julian Norman poster, Obama is Money, and I think of his wisecrack at one point during the campaign that he didn't look like all of the other Presidents on the American money and here he is slapped onto what resembles at least some piece of currency.

WERT: Absolutely. I like that poster too and I think part of the message there is that Obama's raised the money, he is money, he's as solid as gold. Or as good as silver. But I like that poster too. And some of the other ones, Eddie Colan (sp?) in San Francisco, who couldn't be identified for a long time, I thought did just dynamite posters, all in black and white, and mostly with sort of rays or nimbuses emanating from Obama's head. They were put up outside the entranceway to the Oakland



subway terminal, so every morning everybody that went down that hole got to see those posters. But he designed those posters and had them all printed at Kinko's.

KENNEALLY: Fascinating.

WERT: So they're photocopies posters, you know?

KENNEALLY: Right.

WERT: So there's all kinds of incredible new techniques, artistic techniques. Some people like Antar Dayal, who did one of the official posters for the Obama campaign, did his on a Caroline (sp?) scratch pad and then did more traditional engraving. So there's a wide range of artist techniques here. The one on the cover was done by computer graphic overlay by Springmeyer (sp?) out of Chicago, that's on the cover.

KENNEALLY: Great. Well, what I want to do is encourage people to look at the site, which is Obamaposterbook.com. And again, this is very much of course about the campaign and about a man who became president, but I'm interested in the topic from the standpoint of the way technology is changing the book, is changing the way we create art, and share art with people and so I really encourage anyone, regardless of political affiliation, to take a look at this stuff because I think you'll be inspired and the last question then, Hal, what happens next with all of this? Will there be do you think other campaigns? Is there – I mean, Hal, looking out to the future and also knowing so much as you do about the past of political art, what's the lasting impact? I mean there's an impact because of Obama's election, but is there a lasting impact moving forward for the creation of other posters, other such art, for other campaigns?

WERT: Yeah, there's no doubt the phenomenon of the poster movement will continue and particularly with gig posters and I assume as long as those left of center artists are inspired by the candidate, that will continue. There's been a – you know, I think at the end of the campaign because, particularly for artists and particularly those who did the sort of semi-unofficial official campaign – you know, we had that big show in Chicago that Ray Noland and I put together, and Scott Thomas from the Obama campaign, that was called Officially Unofficial and in some ways, that whole campaign that came from the left was that way. And whether that can be sustained or not, they're trying to do it. There's a large number of new posters out supporting healthcare. So they're trying to follow it and they're trying to keep it alive, but I think at the end of the campaign, it was sort of a letdown. Ray Noland and I were having a late breakfast in Chicago, talking about it and he said, did you ever think Hal, this would go this far and I said no, but there really is a



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letdown. What do we do now? And he said, that's true. He said it was so exciting, it was such a great road trip, what do we do now? And I think that's an open question.

KENNEALLY: Well, we'll be looking to you for some answers down the road. Hal Wert, we've been talking with Hal Elliott Wert, who is the author, the collector of a fascinating book from Zenith Press called, *Hope: A Collection of Obama Posters and Prints*. Hal, thank you so much for joining Beyond the Book.

WERT: Chris, you're more than welcome. I've thoroughly enjoyed it and I look forward to the podcast.

KENNEALLY: Absolutely. Well, for everyone here at Copyright Clearance Center and Beyond the Book, thank you for joining us. My name is Chris Kenneally.

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