

# **Projects 35 : Stephen Kroninger : The Museum of Modern Art, New York, July 2-August 9, 1992**

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35

stephen kroninger

projects



**The Museum of Modern Art**

**New York**

**July 2–August 9, 1992**

**The** piecing together of disparate photographic images to create a unified picture is almost as old as the history of photography. The desire to restructure reality through the manipulation of photographs dates back at least to the turn of the century. The term *photo-montage*, which refers to the seamless, printed version of a photo-collage, was first used by the Berlin Dadaists to describe their works shortly after World War I. Raoul Hausmann wrote, "This term translated our aversion at playing artist, and, thinking of ourselves as engineers, we meant to construct, to assemble [*montieren*] our works." Since then, the technique has been intertwined with the history of twentieth-century art and design.

Photo-collage has often been associated with progress and change. It has been a popular medium for political dissent during times of uncertainty and upheaval. The medium's power to reflect the fragmentation and disorientation of modern society while constructing a unified reality from disjointed parts made it ideal for use by revolutionary factions and utopian political movements, particularly those on the left. As an instrument of propaganda, it was prevalent in Russia during the revolution and throughout the Stalin era; it was used for subversive purposes in Germany during the Weimar Republic and the rise of fascism, and in Spain during the Civil War.

Stephen Kroninger, an American, turned to photo-collage in the early 1980s, at a time of growing political conservatism in this country. For Kroninger, the technique's ability to dismember what is presented by the media as "fact" makes it an ideal vehicle for criticism during the Reagan/Bush era. Kroninger sold his first work in 1982, shortly after the beginning of Reagan's presi-

dency, and since then he has chronicled the contemporary American scene. His works range from stinging political illustrations to whimsical caricatures of movie actors and rock stars, and have appeared regularly in publications including the *New York Times*, the *Village Voice*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Esquire*, *Rolling Stone*, and the *Progressive*.

## The root OF ALL EVIL



Plot to Overthrow the West. *The Progressive*. June 1991

**K**roninger believes that since the early fifties, commercial illustration "has tended to be non-committal," and that he is known as an illustrator essentially because of where his works appear rather than for reasons of style or content. Illustration as an art form is limited by the necessity of conveying specific information. The definition of illustration—to render clear—forces most illustrators, both political and commercial, to confine their works to a form of painted or drawn realism. The emphasis on realism is usually accompanied by a soft, almost decorative quality, which satisfies the needs and demands of readers, editors, and advertisers. Kroninger possesses an uncommon ability to ignore convention, in terms of both style and content, and yet create designs that remain extremely successful as illustrations.

Kroninger's sophisticated montages are the products of an artist who is well educated in the history of art and design. With confidence and dexterity, he appropriates from a variety of eclectic sources. The works embody many of the themes, characteristics, and concerns of modernism and are influenced by movements as diverse as Cubism, Dadaism, Surrealism, and Pop art.

The politically satirical photo-collages of the Berlin Dadaists, who used the medium to criticize both the bourgeoisie of the Weimar Republic and the fascist movement in Germany, are strong influences on Kroninger's designs. Stylistically, his works recall the grotesque caricatures of George Grosz and the dreamlike, often nightmarish, collages of Hannah Höch. They share with Höch's collages a chaotic use of scale and an extreme sense of fragmentation: large heads are placed on small bodies, and individual faces are composed from varied sources, often both male and female. Like Höch, Kroninger displays an adeptness at mixing discordant features to create anonymous, often menacing, visages. Other influences include the photo-montages of John Heartfield. Although Heartfield's concern with the realistic treatment of pictorial space and his emphasis on sophisticated darkroom montage techniques are not shared by Kroninger, his works, like Kroninger's, were political satires that appeared in commercial contexts. Heartfield's agit-prop



Japan Buys a Used President. *The New York Times*. November 6, 1989



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montages for the communist party publication *AIZ*, with their scathing critiques of Hitler and the Nazi party, exhibit a delight in the satirical reconstruction of the figure that appears, in a more lighthearted tone, in Kroninger's work; Kroninger's designs are not the products of a devoted party member but of an individual's discontent.

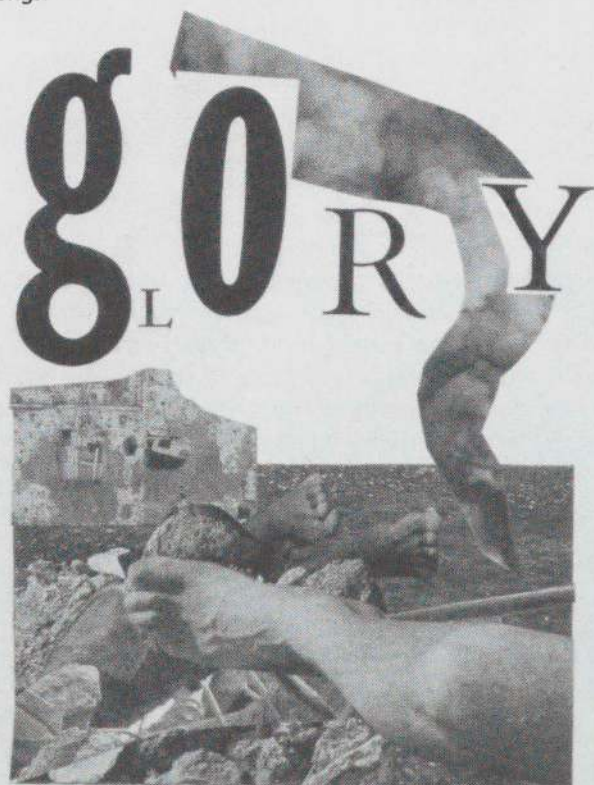
Kroninger also looks to examples in the American print advertising of the forties and fifties. Emigres Herbert Matter, Herbert Bayer, and Ladislav Sutnar brought to the field a knowledge of the avant-garde art and design movements of Europe, particularly Surrealism, and used exaggerated juxtapositions of scale to startle and attract consumers. Like Hungarian designer Gyorgy Kepes, they saw in the technique "the possibility of reshaping the . . . world through a creative new vision." Matter's and Bayer's montages, as they appeared in magazines like *Harper's Bazaar* and *Arts and Architecture*, were relatively dispassionate; rather than providing political commentary, they conveyed a sense of sophistication and were harbingers of good taste.

In addition to its historical precedents, Kroninger's work is affected by the daily bombardment of contemporary popular culture and the mass-media. Television, radio, telephones, and fax machines bring an abundance of information to the artist's fingertips, and there is a desire among graphic artists to remain as current as possible. Since Pop art and particularly Andy Warhol (who began as an illustrator), the graphic arts have rediscovered and expanded their appropriation of popular culture and everyday objects. Kroninger's *Angry Voter* cover for *Time* magazine looks, as one reader pointed out, like a "Mister Potato Head on acid." His collage featuring a picture of Vice President Dan Quayle and the words "This is your mind on drugs" is a direct reference to a popular anti-drug advertisement on television. As Kroninger states, "In the past artists painted what was around them, trees, cows, religion, etc. In the late 20th century what is our culture, our surroundings, but recorded music, television, and magazines?" Indeed, Kroninger often compares his work to Rap music, which borrows fragments of other pieces of music and layers them over a continuous beat to produce original songs.

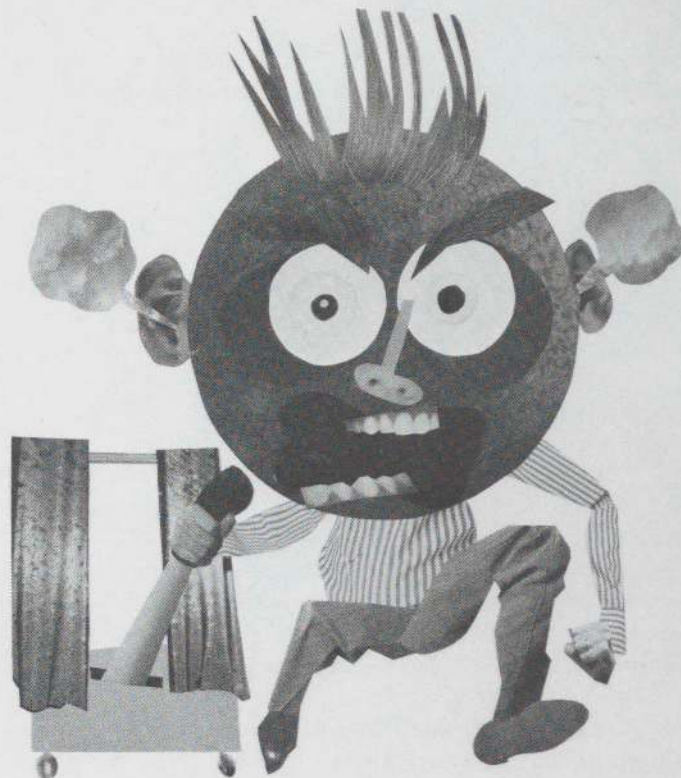
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Glory. *The Village Voice*. April 9, 1991



The Angry Voter. *Time* (cover). March 2, 1992

The primary function of Kroninger's collages is to challenge what television and print news present to us as truth. His highly manipulated images remind us that much of the information we receive has already been manipulated. His twice-distorted designs reveal yet another truth, this one as the artist perceives it. The montages reflect the cynicism and distrust of government that has been growing in this country since Watergate. Many of the recent works specifically question the way the Gulf War was presented to the American public by the news media and the president. By altering the "facts," the artist draws attention to what he believes is the hypocrisy that characterized the war and our views of it.

As the works' disjointed appearance and subject matter reflect the contemporary world, so too do their materials and the process by which they are made. Kroninger (whose father, incidentally, was a garbage collector) constructs his designs from fragments of discarded magazines and newspapers, ranging from pornographic publications to *People*. The process itself is a commentary on the wastefulness of our consumer society. Kroninger recycles consumer publications, turning them back into new material for the very same magazines; ironically, art directors may receive restructured waste from their own back issues.

A single montage may contain elements from any number of sources. Kroninger's satire of John Tower, published in the *Progressive* after the denial of his confirmation as Secretary of Defense, contains a champagne glass from a Mumms advertisement, two breasts from different photographs in *Playboy*, women's hair from a shampoo advertisement, lips from *Vogue*, Bush's podium from *U.S. News and World Report*, Bush's face from *Time*, Tower from *Newsweek*, hands from *GQ*, Tower's tie from *Esquire*, and the suit is cut out of black newsprint. This diversity not only adds an element of complexity to the works, it





*Little John Tower Comes to Grieve in Washington City. The Progressive. April 1989*

also reveals the glut of information (and misinformation) available to each individual.

Kroninger's choice of lettering is consistent with other aspects of his work. He does not create any of his own type—it is all lifted from printed sources. Like the Cubists, Kroninger borrows single letters or full words and applies them to the collage. In the graphic arts, this kind of typography (in a more brutal version) became popular during the Punk Rock movement of the late seventies, most notably in the work done by English graphic designer Jamie Reid for the Sex Pistols. Its use on album covers and advertising handbills was a graphic metaphor for the musicians' lack of proficiency with their instruments. With its forced anonymity, the lettering resembles the Hollywood cliché ransom note and conveniently attaches a threatening and anarchic element to the designs.

KRONinger's use of the cut-and-paste technique exploits its endearing and slightly naive appearance. The viewer is at first charmed by the works, unaware of the intelligent and biting satire that lurks just below the surface. This ostensible playfulness prevents Kroninger's commentary from appearing heavy-handed. The technique also allows Kroninger to compose many of the works extremely quickly. The works reflect a high degree of spontaneity and experimentation, which imbues them with a freshness and an agitated quality unusual for illustration. The Press Clips

# the B|G PiCTURE



*The Big Picture. The Progressive. August 1991*

collages published weekly in the *Village Voice* are completed in anywhere from one to three hours. No preparatory drawings are made; instead, Kroninger works directly with the cutouts, "drawing" with his scissors and experimenting with various shapes and compositions before finally pasting them down. Kroninger cuts many of the pieces into straight edges, avoiding the more realistic and softened curves of the real objects. Chance and improvisation are important elements, but they are tempered by Kroninger's refined sense of composition and line. He states, "The final image should be about line and form rather than specific photographs."

Stephen Kroninger's published designs, like all successful illustrations, attract attention quickly and can be easily comprehended. This is due largely to the clarity and openness of their composition. The relatively inferior reproduction of the original pieces into black-and-white newsprint also tends to simplify the composition and unify the structure. The work's intelligibility is further enhanced by the amount of white space left on the page. Kroninger exploits a predominant characteristic of modern graphic design, which sought elegance and simplicity by leaving much of the page blank. The lack of background sets the stage and the figures come to life like puppets. The borders of the compositions are nonexistent, allowing them to bleed into the rest of the page. It's as if pieces of the magazine have gathered together, independently, to reshape facts as they see fit.



*When the Other Folks Give Up Theirs I'll Give Up Mine. The Village Voice. January 1, 1990*

Kroninger delights in the fact that his political commentary is so accessible to so many, and is featured in so many varying publications. His vibrant style has brought new life to the technique of photo-collage and an aesthetic sophistication to the genre of political satire. His successful reclamation for the commercial arts of a technique that most recently has been used primarily in the fine arts is perhaps a comment on the times. Kroninger saw in this disjointed style an expressive medium perfectly suited for the America of the eighties and nineties—a period that for him is full of hypocrisy and "cracks." In this election year, burdened by distrust of politicians, government, and the media, Kroninger's work genuinely and humorously reflects the dissatisfaction felt by many.

Christopher Mount  
Curatorial Assistant  
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"As soon as Mr. Gorbachev lets Mrs. Gorbachev do his deciding, or even speaking, we will be quoting . . . more women on page one. By that I mean if you are covering local teas, you've got more women (on the front page) than if you're the Wall Street Journal." — Max Frankel, Editor, *The New York Times*. *The Village Voice*. April 17, 1990

## biography

Stephen Kroninger was born in 1957 and is now living in New York City. His works have appeared in a wide variety of magazines, including *Time*, *GQ*, *Mirabella*, *Spin*, *Seventeen*, *Rolling Stone*, *Esquire*, *High Times*, *Guitar World*, *Glamour*, the *Utne Reader*, *Mother Jones*, the *East Village Eye*, the *Progressive*, *Spy*, and *Money*, and in newspapers including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Village Voice*, and the *Boston Globe*. He also designed the cover illustration for the book *50 Ways to Fight Censorship*, by Dave Marsh.

He has exhibited widely in New York at the New School for Social Research, La Boetie, Illustration Gallery, Society of New York Illustrators, Salon des Artists, and at New York University. His works have been shown in San Francisco at ATA Gallery, and in Madison, Wisconsin, at Survival Gallery.

Kroninger has done album covers for Kurtis Blow, Public Enemy, Midnight Oil, and Ahmad Jahmal, and was co-director and animator for Public Enemy's music video, "Shut 'Em Down."

Cover: *Right Wing Assault on Federal Funding for PBS*. *The Village Voice*. May 26, 1992

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