Two of the most recognizable images of twentieth-century art are the most famous painting by that most famous of twentieth-century artists, Pablo Picasso’s Guernica, and the rather-modest mass-produced poster by an unassuming illustrator, Lorraine Schneider, “War is not healthy for children and other living things.” From Picasso’s masterpiece to a humble piece of poster art, artists have used their talents to express dissent, to protest against injustice and oppression, to reveal publicly to the world their strong objection to the actions of the powerful. Visual art, whether high art or posters, broadsides or fliers, cartoons or comic books, murals or graffiti has been used effectively by dissenters to push for change, to protest inequality and discrimination, in a high-minded effort to bring about a better world. Visual art is one of the many valuable tools by which protestors have expressed and promoted their dissenting points of view.

...
The United States is a product of dissent. Religious dissenters, unable to worship according to their own lights, left England, the Netherlands, Rhineland/Palatinate, Scotland, and Ulster to plant colonies in the New World. By the mid-eighteenth century, political dissenters took their protests against what they perceived as a tyrannical government in London so far as to fight a war for independence that culminated in the creation of the United States of America. And they conspicuously inserted the right to dissent in the First Amendment of the nation’s founding document.¹

Americans have taken that right seriously ever since. Whenever the power structure seemed to be overstepping its bounds or whenever people felt the government was not fulfilling its duty to protect everyone’s natural rights, Americans have dissented. And they have expressed their discontent in a wide variety of ways: writing letters, broadsides, and polemics; preaching sermons and delivering speeches; conducting protest marches in the streets; or engaging in acts of civil disobedience. Dissenters have used literature, poetry, music, dance, comedy, cinema, theater, street
theater, and puppetry to castigate the establishment. Whether it was women fighting for the right to vote or abolitionists seeking to destroy slavery or pacifists protesting against World War I or workers demanding the right to organize or beatniks and hippies denouncing middle-class mainstream values, dissenters employed every method imaginable to condemn policies and actions that they deemed unacceptable in a democracy. From Abigail Adams to Alice Paul, from Frederick Douglass to John Brown, from Eugene V. Debs to Martin Luther King Jr., from Mark Twain to Allen Ginsberg, from Joe Hill to Phil Ochs, from H. L. Mencken to Lenny Bruce, Americans have done their best to change the status quo.

We have seen how successful demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience have been in accomplishing at least some of the dissenters’ goals. One thinks of suffragists picketing the White House until the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment and civil rights activists marching from Selma to Montgomery, which led to the Voting Rights Act of 1965, or the Stonewall Riots that kicked off the gay rights movement. In many protests, music has been especially effective in getting the message out to masses of people. The protest music of the 1960s, benefiting from technological advances in radio, television, and the recording industry, got civil rights and antiwar messages out to millions of Americans who had previously been indifferent to the African American struggle for equality and the escalation of the Vietnam War. And the legacy of singers like Pete Seeger and Bob Dylan has had an enormous influence on dissent movements ever since. Along with protest music, visual artists too have used their talents to support dissenting views. Political cartoons, comic books, graffiti, murals, posters, photography, and high art have all been productively used, with varying yet frequent success, in voicing discontent.

In the colonial period, the primary pictorial devices furthering contrarian views were broadsides and cartoons. As defiance against London’s taxation
policies and steadily increasing arbitrary rule in the aftermath of the French and Indian War, groups such as the Sons of Liberty posted broadsides in public places denouncing the Stamp Act, the Tea Act, the “Intolerable Acts,” and other decrees and laws enacted by Parliament. Many of these broadsides were informational, raising public awareness of a regulation that was going to impose hardship on the colonists, but most of them were nothing short of propaganda, with bold-printed exclamatory headlines, for the sole purpose of inflaming public opinion in order to gain adherents to the patriot cause. Samuel Adams, one of the leaders of the Sons of Liberty, had fine-tuned propaganda into an art that became the forerunner of the protest posters of the twentieth century. One of Adams’s comrades in the Sons of Liberty was the celebrated printer/engraver Paul Revere. Revere used his talents to print engravings protesting London’s policies. His most famous engraving was the volatile image he produced of the Boston Massacre, transforming the unruly, menacing mob into peaceful middle-class citizens out for a stroll and depicting the redcoats who were guarding the customs house as malicious, murderous scoundrels.

Political cartoons were also an influential method of expressing dissent in the buildup to the American Revolution. Cartoonists in the colonies and in Britain who supported the colonists’ grievances were withering in their sarcastic caricatures of the king and his Tory ministers. America was usually depicted as a virtuous young woman and Parliament as would-be (or actual) ravishers trying to destroy the virtue of honorable colonists.

By the nineteenth century, political cartoons published in newspapers and periodicals were the favorite means of expressing dissenting views. Whether taking on the imperial presidency of Andrew Jackson or denouncing slaveholders or free-soilers or Irish immigrants or the war hawks leading the country into the War of 1812 or the southerners pushing for a war with Mexico in the 1840s, political cartoons had
a considerable impact on shaping public opinion. The artists sketching
their cartoons and caricatures used humor and sarcasm, poignancy and
moral outrage to express their anti-status-quo views. As is frequently
the case with political cartoons, they often overstepped the bounds of
propriety. One thinks of the many nativist, anti-immigrant cartoons that
were published in the aftermath of the Irish potato famine, depicting
Irish immigrants as sideshow freaks or unintelligent beasts.

Posters too were popular methods of protesting against societal
problems and the government’s inability, indeed unwillingness, to do
something about those problems. One of the most emotive posters
published by the temperance movement, “The drunkard’s progress,”
depicted the nine steps to descending into an alcoholic hell, each
step showing the degeneration of a man from “a glass too much” to
“poverty and disease” and eventual “death by suicide.” Union activists
also utilized posters and fliers to notify workers of strikes, industrial
action, and rallies and as a recruitment tool. Molly Maguires and other
mineworkers in the 1870s, anarchists and radical union organizers at
Haymarket Square in 1886, and railway workers during the massive
strikes of 1877 and 1894 all used posters to inform and enlist picketers.

High culture too contributed to visual protest in the nineteenth century.
Realist artists of the so-called Ashcan School criticized the soul-
destroying inequality that became more and more prevalent during the
Gilded Age. Artists like William Glackens, Robert Henri, George Luks,
and John Sloan produced paintings that forced people to consider the
harsh realities of urban industrial life—the squalor of the slums, rats
rummaging in trash cans, industrial pollution filling the air, raw sewage
in the streets. There was nothing romantic or aesthetically appealing in
their paintings; their goal was to challenge public apathy and persuade
Americans to call for new laws and policies that would address inequal-
ity and poverty.
By the turn of the century, a new form of graphic art was already beginning to be used to promote dissenting views and stimulate change: photography. Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine spearheaded the use of photography as a means for social reform. Both men chronicled the overcrowding of urban slums, homelessness, sweatshops, and especially the plight of children forced to work in textile mills, coalmines, and factories. Their images seared the public consciousness and inspired many Americans to get involved in the campaigns to alleviate the suffering of the poor and to end the exploitation of children. And throughout the twentieth century, photography became an increasingly effective tool for expressing dissent. Dorothea Lange, Margaret Bourke-White, and Walker Evans were among the many photographers whose images of families and individuals devastated by the Great Depression moved the nation in ways that no speech or pamphlet could. And the influence of photography on social reform only increased through the proliferation of magazines like *Life*, *Look*, and *Collier's* that reached a mass audience.

Photography had an impact on other forms of visual dissent, most notably high art and poster art. Edward Hopper’s realist paintings depicting loneliness and alienation have an almost black-and-white photographic sensibility about them. For example, his 1942 painting *Nighthawks*, depicting three customers and an employee in an all-night diner in New York City, conjures a longing to overcome the isolation that separates and even overwhelms individuals living in an alienating urban environment. Later, in the 1960s, pop artist Andy Warhol employed photographic technique in his paintings and silkscreens. Whether it was Campbell’s tomato soup or the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the endless reproduction of images again and again was his sardonic commentary on the mass-produced nature of daily life in modern America.

There is nothing photographic to be sure in the paintings of the postwar abstract expressionists. Like modern jazz bebop musicians who broke
all the rules of harmony and structure, artists like Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, and Mark Rothko abjured all the accepted rules of painting in their critical vision of living in a post-Hiroshima world. Their paintings in the 1950s seemed (whether consciously or unconsciously) to reflect critically on the no-holds-barred anxiety unleashed by the Cold War and the apparent inability of the superpowers to restrain the nuclear arms race.

The long tradition of political cartoons continued and expanded in the twentieth century. Cartoonists in nearly every newspaper and periodical in the country constantly exposed the idiosyncrasies and foibles of politicians, the ill- advised policies of lawmakers, and rampant political corruption. And they protested against just about everything. Cartoonists expressed antiwar, antiunion, anti-immigrant, anticommunist, antiabortion sentiments as well as prowar, prounion, pro-immigration-reform, procommunist, and pro-choice opinions.

Some cartoonists used comic book art to protest against authority. Mad magazine, starting in 1952, offered a hilarious send-up of American politicians, cultural icons, and Cold War propaganda (on both sides) that helped an entire generation cope with indoctrination and anxiety. Robert Crumb began drawing his Zap Comix in the 1960s, ridiculing middle-class values and extolling the countercultural lifestyle. Puppetry was also used in an imaginative way, especially during the Vietnam War. The Bread and Puppet Theater regularly participated in antiwar demonstrations, parading with huge papier-mâché caricatures of Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, Uncle Sam, and other icons of the military-industrial complex.

Creative artists also employed cinema effectively to express dissent. Movies like The Grapes of Wrath in 1940 and Wall Street in 1987 were critiques of the abuses of capitalism, while All Quiet on the Western Front
in 1930 and *Born on the Fourth of July* in 1989 were stirring antiwar films. And documentary filmmakers like Michael Moore and Laura Poitras, whose riveting films *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *Citizenfour*, respectively, gave voice to dissenters and have exposed millions of viewers to persuasive critiques of US policies.

Another form of visual dissent that has been used in the twentieth century is mural art and its offspring graffiti. Mural art projects began in a big way during the New Deal when the Works Progress Administration provided funds to employ out-of-work artists. Thousands of young artists painted thousands of murals on post offices and schools and other buildings being constructed by the WPA. (Some of these young artists later became famous, most notably Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko.) State governments also commissioned artists to paint murals on state buildings. While most of the murals that were commissioned depicted patriotic American scenes, many of the artists inserted social commentary messages into their work—juxtaposing images of destitute workers alongside rich yachtsmen or of a white woman sitting next to a black man on a subway car (which would certainly have offended many people at a time when segregation was the norm) or depicting a woman hanging wash in the yard of her slum dwelling. Some muralists admitted that they were indeed trying to bring about social and political change through their art. Thomas Hart Benton, for example, in his mural *Social History of the State of Missouri*, which he painted for the Missouri state capitol, unflinchingly portrayed many controversial episodes in Missouri history, such as the expulsion of the Mormons; slaves being auctioned; Frank and Jessie James, the fabled outlaw brothers who stole from the rich and gave to the poor; and the suffering brought on by the Great Depression. Benton’s goal through such images was to raise social consciousness and generate reflection and discussion. Expressing views that go against the establishment’s grain, that resist the whitewashing that the authorities always seem to strive for, is a major goal of such
mural artists. And it has reverberated around the world. One thinks of the poignant murals painted in the Northern Ireland city of Derry by the Bogside Artists, who have labored intensely to make sure viewers ponder what happened in that city during the “Troubles” and the killing of fourteen unarmed civil rights protestors by British paratroopers on Bloody Sunday, 30 January 1972. Cities around the world are filled with murals that compel people to think about things they might not want to think about.

Graffiti works in much the same way. In a sense, graffiti is an even more democratic form of mural art, and it has become a truly international phenomenon. Much of it is spray-painted by anonymous folk who are seeking to voice their own view, often on controversial aspects of modern-day life. Frequently graffiti artists are consciously making a political statement, but often the message is simply in the rebellious act of creation itself. Whether they are painting on subway walls in New York City or fences around Union Station in Los Angeles or tenement walls in Lisbon or Rio or the Berlin Wall or the West Bank barrier, individuals, mostly nameless, ordinary people, are (as Bob Dylan observes in “Love Minus Zero / No Limit”) “draw[ing] conclusions on the wall.” Or, as Paul Simon once put it (in “The Sounds of Silence”), “the words of the prophets are written on the subway walls and tenement halls.” Most graffiti artists remain anonymous, but there are many celebrated ones whose works have been acclaimed around the world—Dondi (Donald White), Revok (Jason Williams), Lady Pink (Sandra Fabara), and the mysterious British artist Banksy.

On a smaller scale is one of the most prolific forms of dissent art and one that has been around throughout the nation’s history: posters. Technological advances in the twentieth century in photography, silk-screening, and mass-produced printing have made posters an especially suitable (and economical) way to get out a dissenting message.
Like broadsides before them, posters are informative, but they are also an extremely effective way to dramatize a specific point of view. Suffragists, labor organizers, civil rights organizations, antiwar activists, draft resisters, countercultural rebels, and antiabortion militants have produced and distributed millions of posters in an attempt to influence public opinion and governmental policy. From posters urging workers to join the IWW or SNCC to the aforementioned Lorraine Schneider’s “War is not healthy for children and other living things” or the image of a protestor publicly burning his draft card under the caption “Fuck the draft,” protest posters have swayed people to enlist in dissenting causes throughout the twentieth century. Activists published posters supporting civil rights, gay rights, feminism, Chicano farm workers, the American Indian Movement, and animal rights, while others created posters denouncing the draft, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, atrocities that American soldiers were committing in Vietnam, *Roe v. Wade*, corporate greed, and the military-industrial complex. To this day, dissenters such as the Black Lives Matter movement produce posters proclaiming “Hands up don’t shoot” to protest police killings of unarmed black men, while the Guerrilla Girls, a feminist artist group, continues its thirty-year campaign with evocative protest posters cheekily raising the question, “Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?”

In the Tamiment Library at New York University, there is a rich collection of political protest posters that are part of the long tradition of using graphic art to express and propagate dissenting opinions. The posters housed in the collection cover many of the dissent movements of the twentieth century, especially the second half of the century: labor, civil rights, the Vietnam War, American imperialism, feminism, gay rights, and other minority-rights movements. The samples from the collection reproduced here are grouped (chronologically as far as possible) according to subject: labor/socialism, civil rights/apartheid, antiwar/
counterculture, feminism, minority rights. This is somewhat arbitrary because some of the posters have overlapping themes.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Progressive movement demanded federal action to rein in the insatiable greed of the robber barons, to protect the victims of industrialism, and to do something about poverty and income inequality. With Theodore Roosevelt in the White House, there was some reform; but for many progressives, it was not enough, and some of them turned to more radical remedies. In 1894, the president of the American Railway Union, Eugene V. Debs, was arrested for leading the ARU’s strike against the Pullman Company. During his trial, the prosecution repeatedly accused him of being a socialist. Sentenced to six months in prison, Debs, curious, spent his time reading socialist and communist manifestoes and wound up converting to socialism. Upon his release, Debs founded the Socialist Party of America. Also around the turn of the century, the anarchist Emma Goldman and other radicals like Victor Berger, Big Bill Haywood, Joe Hill, and the communist Elizabeth Gurley Flynn worked diligently to convince workers to unite in order to overthrow the capitalist system. They, and others, organized the most radical of the labor unions in 1905, the Industrial Workers of the World (aka “Wobblies”), which called for the destruction of capitalism and the establishment of a socialist America. Thus, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, the labor movement became a central feature of radical politics in the US, and one of the chief means union organizers used to gain recruits and spread the anticapitalist message was through fliers and posters. Several of the posters reproduced in Make Art Not War are from the IWW. Even though the federal government persecuted the Wobblies during the first Red Scare to the point of almost destroying the union, the IWW continued to exist. Even today, it is still functioning, although nowhere near the strength it had exhibited during the heyday of Hill, Goldman, Flynn, and Haywood. The posters in figures 44–46 are from the 1960s
IWW and deal with draft resistance and the antiwar movement. The posters in figures 45 and 46 have also been combined and printed as a single poster. The Elizabeth Gurley Flynn poster (c. 1955) was an advertisement for a public address this founding member of the IWW delivered in Pittsburgh.

There are many other prolabor posters in the Tamiment collection. One of them (figure 11) urges workers to vote for the American Labor Party candidate for mayor of New York in 1949, Congressman Vito Marcantonio (he lost). Figure 13 is a Jewish Labor Committee poster calling attention to how racism and religious bigotry are manipulated by the bosses to undermine the labor movement. There are three American Postal Workers’ Union posters, one of them (figure 21) proclaiming the APWU’s solidarity with Martin Luther King Jr. on the twentieth anniversary in 1983 of the March on Washington and two (figures 19–20) protesting Reagan’s budget cuts in 1985. “It’s our turn” (figure 17) was part of a boycott campaign against Farah slacks, which was the largest producer of men’s trousers in the 1970s. Activists protested the sweatshop conditions that its workers, mostly Chicanos, were forced to endure. The poster calling for the boycott of TWA (figure 18) supported the Independent Federation of Flight Attendants, which was in the midst of a strike in 1986 protesting the airline’s unsafe flying conditions and the unfair pay cuts forced on flight attendants. “There are but two sides in a war” (figure 63) calls for the international community to boycott the giant oil corporation Gulf for its practices in Angola. Gulf Oil was financing the Angolan government’s military operations against the people of Angola in exchange for a sweetheart deal to exploit the country’s oil resources. Other labor posters in the collection support subway employees’ rights, urge workers to register to vote, especially during World War II, and call for workers around the country to march in solidarity with all international workers on May 1.