

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF OUTRAGE

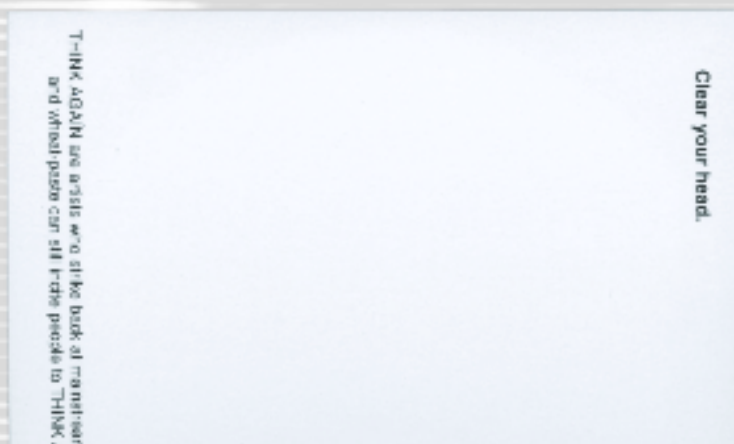
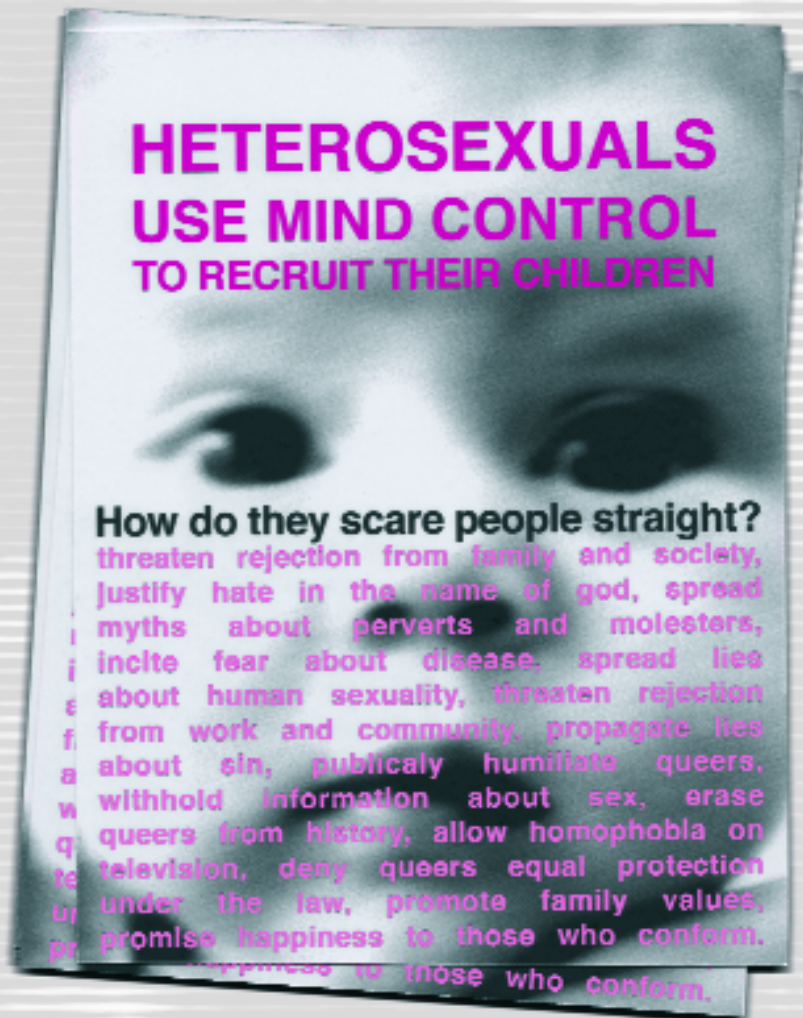
THINK AGAIN expects something political from art. We use images to challenge mainstream ideas that perpetuate injustice.

THINK AGAIN recruits artmaking in the service of political action. As an artist-activist collaborative, we design and distribute graphic materials, produce media campaigns, stage street actions, and hand out agitprop at community events. Our work combines grassroots politics, cultural theory, sociological evidence, and humor to create a visual language for talking about public life. We've taken on an array of progressive political issues from race justice to the structural violence against women and from hate crimes to the meat industrial complex. We use Xerox machines and wheat-paste to prompt people to THINK AGAIN.

We distribute much of our work in face-to-face encounters with people on the street and use agitprop to spark conversations. Some people stop and react to the work for a few moments; others join us in a discussion for an hour. We are energized when people engage ideas about why welfare was revoked or whether a pre-emptive attack is justified. In every interaction we try to understand what fuels cultural backlash and how people develop their sense of collective justice, humanity, and democracy. These encounters force THINK AGAIN to reconsider what constitutes the political mainstream, what kind of power it has, and how the Right effectively obscures ideological and economic injustice.

THINK AGAIN is sad to report that many of these conversations make us wonder if producing political indifference is one of the monumental accomplishments of contemporary culture in the United States. What kind of society condones blithely stepping over a homeless person in a city street and ignoring a complaint of hunger, while holding a blended coffee that costs more than half the minimum hourly wage?

THINK AGAIN wonders whether the sheer speed of culture creates ethical vertigo such that what appears to be indifference is actually confusion. Most of us don't blink as our eyes shift from front-page stories about ethnic cleansing to busses shrink-wrapped with Citibank advertisements. We process loss, environmental devastation, self-actualization, and greed within a short segment of a primetime drama. Mediated images tinker with perceptions of control as wage laborers try to find affordable daycare and unravel embedded reports on weapons of mass destruction. THINK AGAIN reluctantly plays along – we interrupt this speed and challenge pedestrians to distinguish



between agitprop and HBO ads.

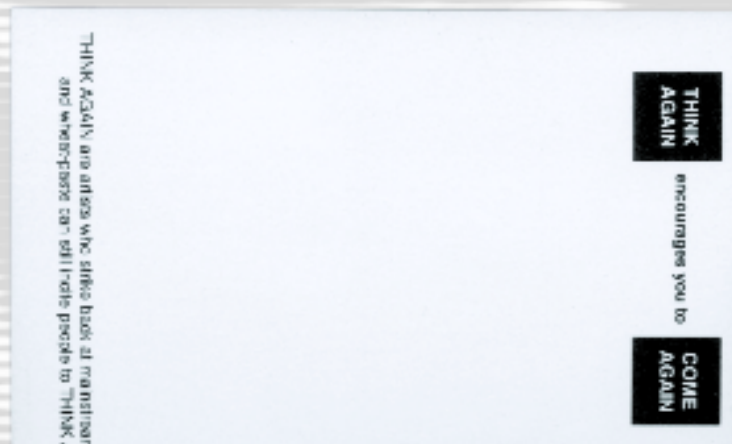
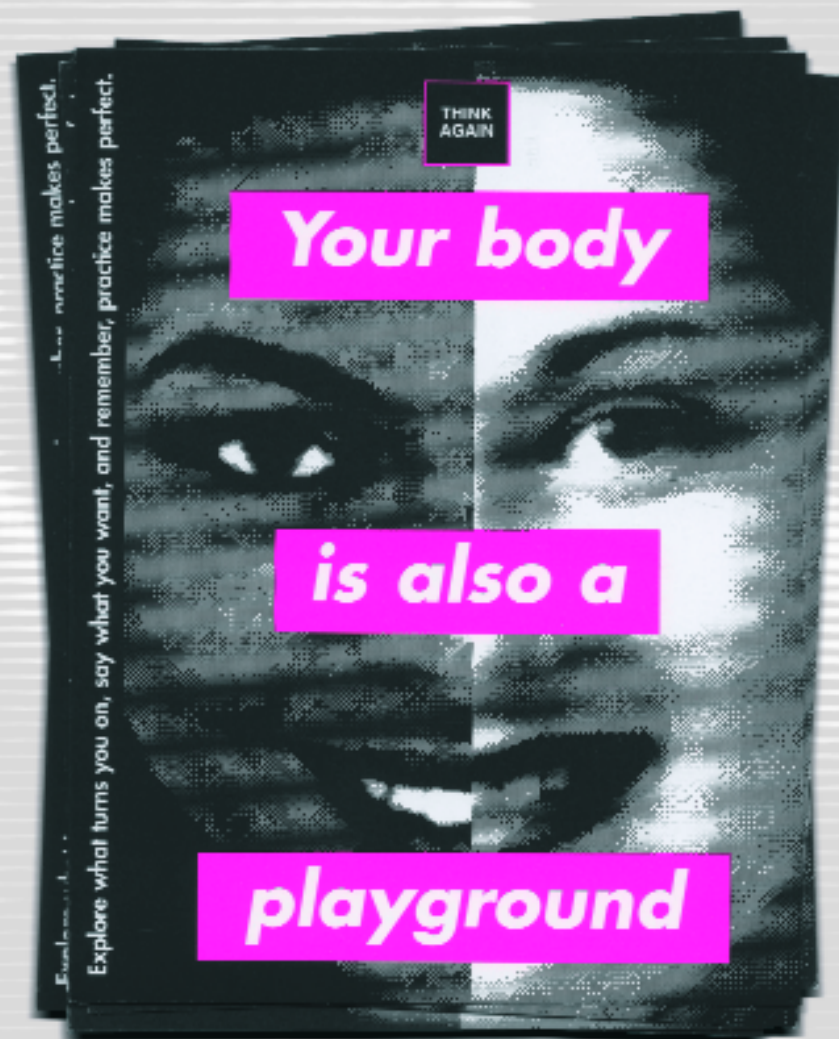
However, attributing indifference to speed alone is too convenient. So THINK AGAIN questions the social institutions that invest monstrous amounts of creativity and capital to guarantee that people are sufficiently mystified and politically stymied. The purveyors of propaganda – from ad agencies to the Pentagon – hire teams of graphic artists, purchase ad space, secure product placements, and plaster advertisements on everything. The Pentagon has a dedicated line item for this activity. Perhaps the purveyors coax the society's unapologetic fascination with its own economic and military privilege. Does a market pre-exist for oxymoronic fetishes like luxury tanks, camouflage lingerie, and homeless-chic fashions?

THINK AGAIN's impulse to plaster political posters on the city streets is a desire to convert consumers into environmentalists, gays into queers, carnivores into vegetarians, television executives into human rights advocates. It's a desire to make a democracy act like a democracy.

We have worked hard to generate art about these issues with minimal indictment, since we too are implicated in the structures that produce all sorts of racist, sexist, and globalized human suffering. By and large, if you are reading this you have eaten junk food, purchased a pair of sweatshop jeans, fantasized about an overpaid movie star, paid taxes to a war machine, and speak the language most associated with colonial and post-colonial enterprises.

Unfortunately, feeling implicated and without agency tends to amplify indifference and justify inaction. Certainly the status quo benefits when politically progressive people yawn the postmodern yawn and talk fatalistically about racism or empire as totalizing, impenetrable, and irresistible. (Though Miami-Dade's unresolved chads and Halliburton's newest contract hardly make the case for participatory government.)

THINK AGAIN finds it challenging to make agitprop that treads the line between critique and action. On the one hand, we focus on how structures of power are linked to and produce experience. We make connections between cherishing a wedding ring and international labor (*Popping the Question*, 1999) or rape and NAFTA (*Hello/Hola*, 2002). On the other hand, we make work that taps into people's individual sense of political possibility, gives permission to have an opinion or to resist, and moves beyond sloganeering or consciousness-raising to local political action.



THINK AGAIN revels in the moment of rupture and awareness when a teenage girl looks down at a plate of bacon and pictures the hog. These moments of political imagination challenge efforts by consumerist culture, mainstream media, and "patriots" to obscure our sight from the real conditions of violence, labor, and suffering.

THINK AGAIN draws inspiration from late eighties activism when artists effectively helped society imagine social transformation and mobilize political action. There is a long list of precedents; we are influenced by collaboratives like Gran Fury, Group Material, and the Lesbian Avengers. And like some of these collectives, the starting point for THINK AGAIN emerges from our interest in problems facing queers. Most importantly, we argue that there are no issues facing queers that are neutral in regard to racism, sexism, or economics.

As a strategy for shifting away from the identity politics of the nineties and returning to an activism based on social transformation, we use queer as a conceptual touchstone in our work. We see homophobia as a set of cultural myths about sex and bodies that masquerade as truths about human nature. A queer criticality compels us to dismantle propagandist stories across issues. THINK AGAIN attempts to redress myths about uncivilized Arabs, irresponsible welfare queens, lazy homeless people, and fears of anyone black or brown. It is not surprising that these subjects sit at the center of society's moral panic, with brown people, poor people, and queer people always threatening to unravel the social fabric.

THINK AGAIN also converses extensively and collaborates with people doing the difficult work of mobilizing communities, influencing policy, and fashioning concrete political goals. And like our allies, THINK AGAIN makes an effort to reconcile contemporary problems facing progressive and queer organizing efforts. On the one hand, we question progressive initiatives that focus primarily on economic justice, the global marketplace, and civil liberties, but systematically exclude a critique of the cultural logic of homophobia and racism. And although increasingly some non-queer organizations include sexual liberation in their missions, we fear that homophobia and racism become addenda to what these organizations see as the primary work of establishing, for example, limits to economic imperialism, local control over economies, fair labor practices, and multilateralism.

On the other hand, THINK AGAIN is concerned about the co-optation of the queer movement by gay assimilationists who argue that to gain concrete political victories GLBT leadership should use conventional political processes and appeal to cor-

porate interests. This approach requires that queers remain (largely) silent on issues pertaining to class, race, sexual difference, and misogyny. It also requires that we abide by the same political and self-censorship that straight people do (i.e. insist everyone aspires to have a traditional family, refrain from talking explicitly about sex, and ignore anyone living below the poverty line).

While the culture contemplates why Will can't find a boyfriend at Grace's wedding reception, THINK AGAIN wonders what happened to curriculum reform, queer-affirmative labor laws, public condom distribution, inclusive sex education, GLBT teen suicide prevention, and broadened visibility for transgenders and bisexuals. We squirm as property ownership, wealth accumulation, marriage, and Pottery Barn sofas become the signs of desirable gay and lesbian lives.

Is it unreasonable to expect a progressive movement not confined by sexual prudishness and a "gay agenda" not driven by materialism? (For that matter, is it unreasonable to expect a queer movement not caught in sexual prudishness, one that views sexual desire as politically productive rather than politically suicidal?) THINK AGAIN expects all progressive movements to address the cultural structures of homophobia that will persist even after gay TV characters adopt children together or Congress approves a living wage.

But let's be practical, what can we realistically expect from a work of political art?

Although implementing cross-issue politics is daunting in practice, it may be easier to design for offset press. THINK AGAIN conceives of projects that support a vision of politics against fragmentation and encourage alliances across communities. This requires designing agitprop that offers multiple points of entry and acknowledges the unequal effects of power on different cultural groups. For example, *Queer Essentials* – a series of sixteen postcards that first appeared in 1998 – is a collection of comments on domestic policies and political debates during the Clinton years. Commentary on hate crimes, the revoking of immigrant rights, and preliminary challenges to affirmative action appeared in a single pack and were distributed at an array of issue-oriented community events across the country.

THINK AGAIN sees imagemaking as an accessible, flexible form of social critique as well as a mode of posing a question, making a counterpoint, and offering public information. Our political graphics are jam-packed with analysis. Operating between the sound bite and the editorial, we argue that "community revital-

ization” is a euphemism for displacement (*White Blight*, 1999) and that the rhetoric of humanitarian aid is a propagandist strategy (*Humanitarian Daily Ration*, 2001).

THINK AGAIN sees political art as an organizing tool and a method for igniting face-to-face conversations. All of the projects included in *A Brief History of Outrage* were distributed for free through community organizations, via both direct distribution and the internet. We hand out postcards at Pride parades, park mobile billboards in front of television studios (*CIA TV*, 2001), and send digital posters to nonprofits trying to mobilize against the war machine (*Protestgraphics*, 2003). In this process, we try to meet the broadest range of people from angry conservatives who throw the postcards in the trash to our allies who post them on the fridge or hang them in offices. It’s all a form of political work. Additionally, much of THINK AGAIN’s artwork is exhibited in museums and reprinted in magazines and books.

Creating agitprop that appears in public requires THINK AGAIN to confront the changing reality of what constitutes public space and how and by whom it is controlled. THINK AGAIN grapples with the increasing disappearance of physical space for agitprop, the proliferation of advertising on everything, the pervasive censorship by media companies, the surveillance of guerrilla interventions by law enforcement, and since 9/11, the increasing acceptance of federally produced propaganda.

*A Brief History of Outrage* presents a range of strategies aimed at undoing the corporatization and surveillance of public space. Our efforts exploit the contextual meaning of location. THINK AGAIN places artwork where social and economic classes intersect (e.g., billboards about gentrification appearing along commuter routes). We distribute work where people are just as likely to be straight or queer (e.g., handing out postcards about sodomy at a neighborhood restaurant). We intervene where people expect to be silenced or policed (e.g., billboards questioning state sanctioned marriage in front of City Hall). We glue where people expect to see the morning news (e.g., “headlines” about anti-militarism stickered over newspaper vending machines). We intercede where people go to consume (e.g., postcards surreptitiously slipped into “Go-Card” advertising racks, holiday cards inserted into greeting card boxes at Kmart).

Most of THINK AGAIN’s work from 1997 to 2003 appears in this book, arranged thematically. *A Brief History of Outrage* includes artwork combining photography, design, digital imaging, drawing, and collage. Additionally, we provide photographic documentation of the work to illustrate how it appears in context. *A Brief History of Outrage* also includes a new series of collages,

entitled *Samples #1-11*, which appear on pages opposite our work from the previous six years. Combining unaltered advertising images and documentary photographs, the collages mine the symbolic terrain of advertising and mass media and set these public languages against a radically different kind of imagery.

With the collages, we investigate how public images deploy explicit and implicit political content and structure the polity’s conception of civic life. *Samples #1-11* also provide context to the topics that THINK AGAIN has considered; they draw from some of the most prominent images in our culture. For example, Target comments on gentrification, Altoids comments on hate crimes, and Fox TV comments on funding federal intelligence. Public images also capitalize on and manipulate private fantasies and fears, translating empire into lifestyle (Kenneth Cole), social work into bathroom tile (Ann Sacks), and conflict diamonds into intimacy (De Beers).

Of course, work that ignites a progressive political imagination must also contend with the opposing cultural institutions that try to encourage people to think and act conservatively, defend the status quo, and denigrate progressive politics. *Samples #1-11* expose how the mass media colludes in cultural backlash and how mediated images are enmeshed with the fabric of daily life. Finally, *Samples #1-11* reflect an aspect of our larger critical project over the past six years: one that investigates correspondences between lived experience and represented reality, fact and fiction, and political process and mystification.

It is the nature of mediated culture to invert the scale of things, to make Calvin ads the size of skyscrapers and to insist that wars are necessary inconveniences. It is through creative acts that consumer culture translates everything into a commodity or market. And it is via acts of imagination that the political machine exploits fear in the service of empire. We are outraged at the super-slick, MTV-styled Army promos that reconfigure enlisting in a war machine as an act of self-realization. The lights dim and the theater quiets as *An Army of One* screens before *Eight Mile* begins, Eminem appearing as himself.

THINK AGAIN dissents. *A Brief History of Outrage* attempts to restore things to size.

David John Attyah

S.A. Bachman