

THE STUDENT MOVEMENT OF MAY 1968 AND THE FINE ART STUDENTS¹

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It has been a year and a few months since the height of the people's uprising.

We have been through months where each day incarnated the meaning of "movement" and "change." And the most obvious visual representation of such movements and changes has been reflected on the walls of our cities.

The walls in the cities formed an exhibition, which owed its presentation to the constant presence of the people within [those walls].

The cities' walls became a visual crystallization of the people's beliefs and opinions and the strategy behind their movement; news announcements, calling for demonstrations, expressing hatred toward . . . , expressing fondness toward . . . , the glorification of martyrs, strike announcements, commemorating events, etc.

All these, embodied in a slogan, a poem, or an image, represented the movement of a nation forming a public communication in its most efficient and most extensive shape; a communication that—at least in our country—had never, and in no form, achieved such a scale.

Yes, people represented themselves and "real life." They transformed their clean and cheerful yet extremely depressing and suffocat-

1 "Jonbesheh Dāneshjouyi May 1968 va Dāneshjouyāneh Honarhāyeh zibā," *Kār va Honar* (Dey 1358): 6–9.

and then there should be a comprehensive comparison between the results of all these studies and one's own society, etc., so that eventually art too is studied in one's own society . . . so that it will pave the way for a creative, dynamic, and humanist art education. And the fact of the matter is that such studies and wisdoms are in extreme contradiction with the basis of the subordinate and "anti-proletarian" governments. One contradicts the other and that is exactly the reason why, in our society, not only have the educational or noneducational "art" books held no dynamic, progressive, and practical content, but exactly the opposite: they have been designed for the purpose of stupefying the students' and art trainees' mind and spirit and, in the most futile way, they go as far as teaching "large-scale handwriting [calligraphy]!" and copying fake paintings—using the grid method!

In any case until now, apart from what they have learned and expressed through their campaign and of necessity, people (ordinary people and even art students) are not and have never been well educated in art, and this will of course affect their own creation of art and their approach toward it.

On the other hand, there is also the fact that as the people's battle was reaching its height—and under the aforesaid circumstances—there was almost no sign of the masses of graphic artists and professional artists, who probably are academically educated and know about "technique," and who reflect the years of suffocation imposed upon our people as their "field of artistic prancing."

Of course in our opinion it is completely normal for the pioneers of the modern techniques and styles in art, which were either directly or indirectly approved and admired by the Empress Farah Diba—the "Patron of art" and the "Nurturer of culture"—to get so shocked and confused facing the fast and clamorous movement of the masses that they would either take refuge in the "peaceful" and "virtuosic"! and "cultured"! settings of the West—the land of the worthy—or in the midst of confusion and consternation—and definitely with repulsion—they would just become the observers of art becoming "vulgar" and turning into "street art"!, in an "unsettling" atmosphere!, made by common people, with filthy clothes and their bodies; probably sweaty and unwashed, people who have never played a part in their Avant-garde!, neat, nicely colored, and designed works of art inside grand, bright, and shiny museums.

The reason [for resisting the formation of a popular art] might be

that they [committed artists] are not willing to use their abilities to serve a context that is in no way suited to their bourgeois tendencies and they even move toward its negation.

Yes, this is also a fact.

In any case, we are facing a new form of art in the appearance of our cities and in practice—for various reasons, some of which were mentioned before—we witness the low standard of this type of art.

The design and production of socio-political posters, in their present dynamic form in our country, is a new and young phenomenon and hence it still has not found its own special identity. There have not been that many experiments (especially regarding quality) [in this field]. Although the masses showed a lot of creativity through the dynamic course of the uprising, which was the result of the ardor and the essential necessity of that time, yet the ordinary people—who carried the heaviest burden throughout this movement—have gradually started to simply imitate the ordinary and common examples of the posters produced by other people and in many cases a boring monotony and similarity of some sort shows itself. Therefore, at the moment one should try to overcome these shortcomings.

One aspect of the enrichment of standards for this form of art in our country could be an understanding of the cases experienced in countries that are in a similar situation.

Within its own capacity *Kār va Honar* [*Labor and Art*] tries to study and introduce such examples. And to achieve this, it needs your help and cooperation.

In this issue we will get to know the final outcome of activities and the working method of activist students who produced valuable pieces through the May revolt in 1968 [in] France. Evidently, the purpose of this study is to observe their experience and not to make them into role models.

In its next issues, *Kār va Honar* aims to study examples of work presented at the height of the uprising in Iran.

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In 1789 the first bourgeois revolution—the endpoint of feudalism and the starting point of capitalism—took place in France.

In 1871, thanks to the powerful force of [the] Paris workers' determination, the first communist government was formed [the Paris

Commune] and, through its seventy days of rule, became a great example for greater revolutions in the world that were to follow.

In 1968, between May 13 and June 16, the Sorbonne became the student council headquarters; students who seemed to want to establish a free land within “Charles de Gaulle’s” Empire.

The capitalist culture of the West was going through a crisis; a crisis caused by the nature of the anti-proletarian system of capitalism, caused by the hideousness of Imperialism and all its manifestations, together with the repression of the suppressed masses and with developing corruption and moral decadence—and of course born from the capitalist societies’ relations and terms—that was going to infect the whole society, like leprosy, with capital and exploitation. The smallest cry of protest, threatening and dangerous, was silenced even before being heard, and through all this the communist party of France, which was supposed to be the cry of protest, had transformed itself into voiceless and muffled whispers; the leaders of the party were busy bargaining with the authorities!, hoping to solve their problems through sharing the power and winning a few more seats in parliament. And what was the result? The workers are suppressed and exploited. As for cultural and social institutions: subjugated by capital and capitalism, [they become] servants of the despicable interests of the bourgeoisie. Universities play the part of preparing the screws and bolts of the capitalist government very well, and the student is necessarily expected to walk peacefully into the universities just like an obedient lamb, learn the rules of the capitalist system, and then . . .

But it had become unbearable. The students were no longer willing to bow in front of the class conflicts in the university.

“We will fight against the class-biased university.”

“We condemn the system, which is disadvantageous to the children of the workers and farmers in all levels of education.”

“We will fight against the role expected of the student by the capitalists; the role of a guard dog for the capitalist society.”

“We will fight against exploitation.”

[PARTS OF THE STATEMENT FROM THE
STUDENTS’ GENERAL ASSEMBLY, MAY 15]

Public opinion was that the most dominant movement of all was that of the fine art students.

May 16: Following the assemblies, in order to implement the strategies of the fight, the fine art students, together with other students and artists who had joined them, occupied a studio. Upon arrival they wrote on the door to the studio:

Yes! To the atelier [workshops] for the people

No! to the atelier [workshops] for the bourgeoisie

The people's atelier (ATELIER POPULAIRE) began its work. Alongside the production of the posters, a manifesto was issued that outlined the beliefs of the striking students who worked at the atelier:

“We resist the existing discipline within the bourgeoisie that is supported by the oppressive forces in order to separate the artists from the working class, and by locking away the artist inside the ivory tower of art they are turning him into a safety valve within the mechanisms of capitalist society. We must seek change in ourselves and in the society and to achieve that, the key is to open the artists' eyes to the workers' problems and to understanding them.”

At the time when there were ten million workers in France on strike, those working at “the people's atelier” would go to factories, workshops, and buildings occupied by the workers in order to learn from them how to serve the pioneers of the battle against class conflict.

Now the number of French students, foreign students, and the artists who passionately took part in producing the posters had highly increased. And fear of the police, right wing attacks, and raids by incited thugs had resulted in setting strict regulations to access the atelier. (In fact the obstacles preventing people from getting inside the atelier's building were harder to get through than those placed all the way through Paris and up to the atelier's entrance.) The workers came to the atelier with suggestions for slogans and for discussions with the artists and students, to criticize the posters, and also to distribute them throughout neighborhoods.

After joining the workers, the revolutionary students and artists would reconsider their ideologies and through the act of criticizing,

as well as self-criticizing, they were trying to overcome the personal bourgeois habits that were consciously or subconsciously affecting their work.

In order to approve or disapprove each poster, there were hours of discussion within a specific committee. And among them were designers who never before had to justify their work to anyone. Hence, this way of treating the designers' works led to issues as well. In fact, producing the posters was caused by an impulsive movement, as all student movements are.

No one had planned anything beforehand. It was some spontaneous reaction toward the situation.

After discussing [such questions as] whether “we should—or should not—be the messengers of an ideology; [and if yes,] which ideology?” “Are we doing it right?” “Should we get to know ourselves and each other again through a political belief?” and . . . hence setting boundaries for art, the walls of the Sorbonne were covered instantly by this slogan: “prohibition is prohibited!”

It seemed as if no one was willing to accept any boundaries. And that was the major contradiction of the movement: seeking a socialist society, while constructing a new man, and at the same time refusing discipline.

Yet things were progressing, in a feverish rush, in a setting overflowing with haste and mobility; in order or in chaos, it was nevertheless progressing. At the peak of excitement and fervor in producing the posters, artists, curious students, and other fighters were milling about in the atelier and in appearance it was chaos and turmoil. Sometimes they numbered three or four people, and sometimes they'd reach two hundred. There were posters everywhere. On string lines, on the floor, in the hallways, etc.

“Police” and “the people” are some of the main subjects for the posters. The “C.R.S.” the powerful, oppressive police is sometimes presented by the sign “S.S.” [in the posters]. The blind power of C.R.S. without eyes or a face, only with a special pair of glasses and a mask, is portrayed as a tool of oppression.

The masses are portrayed in different ways and mainly in the form of a comprehensive totality, using dots and spots of color.

Mostly, the main elements in the posters are tools; screwdriver against truncheon. (Worker against the police.)

Another significant content of these posters is “the worker and the

factory.” The worker—even as an individual—is considered a totality. He represents the whole of the working class, with its specific and classic definitions, as do the factories with sawtooth roofs and tall chimneys.

The simplicity of images is a characteristic of the posters of May 68. It seems as if there is supposed to be a symbol for everything; everything is immediate. One must react instantly, instantly portray and express an issue. A message [must] be communicated and it must instantly make an impact. The message has to keep De Gaulle and his crew awake at night. It should curse and shock. The students were not polite and tactful young people. They did not want to have dialogues and discussions with anyone. Their shouts would deafen the upstarts of the capitalist government.

The posters worked as the student movement’s vocabulary. Culture is a direct expression of class conflict. That is why the purpose of “the people’s atelier” was to condemn bourgeois culture. Of course, limiting the whole uprising only to the field of culture is nothing more than a delusion, and although more and more posters were being produced, the purpose could not have been to cover the whole country with posters using just one central source. Nonetheless, the establishment of more “people’s ateliers” must be supported at any location where workers are fighting.

More than 500 posters with only the mention of their place of production at the bottom—and mostly without the name of the designer—have been archived.

Political posters of all sorts have been around for ages, but the posters of May 68 are unique for their efflorescence, since their quality, the kind of creativity applied to them, and their impact on the audience are still unrivaled today. The posters were not all made by fine art students; [students from the] medical school, [the] school of science, . . . and other universities in Paris and other cities, as well as independent groups, must be credited as well.

Most of the works are the result of teamwork. Despite the fact that the posters of May 68 are known as impromptu pieces, their creation and coming to life was not unplanned. The students had all the experience of their predecessors before them. For example, in 1967/68 in Paris, there was an exhibition of graphic artwork by the artists who created unforgettable pieces at the time of the October Revolution in Russia, supporting the Soviet [Union’s] state councils.

These pieces were reproduced via screen print (a method of hand-print using simple tools: wooden frame, silk, ink, and trowel) and, based on this method's nature—limited facilities and hence the simplicity of forms and avoidance of unnecessary details, and the application of one or two colors in each poster—the posters of May 68 gained a unique identity. Most of the posters are the result of a merger between different slogans with the same design, which could be justified by the particular circumstances of the time and the immediacy of the events.

Based on the division of labor, one group—mostly workers—was in charge of finalizing the posters' slogans and contents. Of course this method did not stop the designers from working on slogans that were not previously chosen. But the pedantic selection and study of the slogans and their contents, and discussing around them, helped “the people's atelier” to develop its political viewpoint, and this was the movement's leading motivation. For one should never be ignorant of the workers' real needs and the reality of their fight. That is how the slogans created through class conflict reached their target with extreme efficiency; referring back to these slogans, the designers would be able to create posters that [can] effectively support the people's battle.

Nowadays, too, various political and simple posters are designed and reproduced based on the rules and principles of that time, and the achievements of their unique method of expression are still effective.

The artistic and cultural activities of the youth movement of May 68 were not restricted to the production and proliferation of posters; wall newspapers, street theater, puppet shows, concerts, and . . . were other examples of these activities. Art played a specific part in the movement.

Eventually, on June 27, “the people's atelier,” too, was evacuated by the police. The last days of the movement were as sad and depressing as its first days seemed heroic.

Red flags were taken down from universities and factories, yet the waves of youth protests had traveled throughout Europe, America, and even through parts of Asia.

TRANSLATED BY MARYAM MOHAJER