

The Posivibe Project
And The History & Impact of
Morale Boosting Posters and Positive Street Art

Michelle Bernard

5/5/14

Senior Seminar

Polacco

On the surface, the situation seemed absolutely perfect. I had just completed one of the most challenging semesters of my college career. I had aced my classes and summer was finally here. And yet, here I was, battling another sleepless night. Underneath the smiling façade that so many have become accustomed to seeing was a girl completely at war with herself. I was burnt out and felt so lost and unhappy. My anxiety was horrific, my self-esteem was low, and the constant over thinking was consuming me. “What are you going to do after you graduate?” “What is your thesis project going to be?” “What is going to happen in the future?” “Nothing is going to work out for you.” “You aren’t good enough.” “Why can’t you be happy?” “Why am I feeling like this?” “Stop crying.” “Hold it together.” “Shut up, brain.”

I burst out into a sweat and my pulse began to increase. I could hear my heart beating. I tried breathing. In...one...two...three. Out...one...two...three. After tossing and turning, I sat up in bed and looked down at my laptop. I opened it and began writing. I began venting about school, the future, my personal life, my major, and my upcoming thesis project. With every word I wrote, I felt the weight of my troubles cease. The darkness surrounding me began to lift. I slowly began to feel better. After being at my lowest point, I realized what I wanted to create for my thesis project. I wanted to create a project that could be therapeutic for others and myself in times of weakness; a form of positive reinforcement that could brighten anyone’s day and reassure them that they are good enough and that they should never give up.

Everyone has moments of weakness, whether they want to admit it or not. They’re unavoidable and sometimes the smallest details can make your day go from great to horrible. For my thesis, I have created The Posivibe Project—a series of hand lettered digital posters and bumper stickers with encouraging messages on them that can help brighten someone’s day, give

them a confidence boost, and remind them that they are good enough. My project can work in a variety of settings. It can work as a poster in the gallery, or it can transition to the street in the form of a small bumper sticker that could be placed practically anywhere. I believe that positivity should have no limits. By analyzing the history of the poster and examining morale boosting posters from the early to mid 20th century and contemporary positive street art campaigns, I will explore how art with positive messages can make a difference by encouraging and motivating the viewer and the impact they had and currently have on society.

Posters have existed for a long time, but they grew in popularity as an art form in the late 19th century. The initial goal of posters was simple: to grab the viewer's attention and to deliver a message, whether it was for a product, a performance, or any other event that needed advertising. As stated in *Graphic Design Reproduction & Representation*,

It was during the nineteenth century that the large-scale lithographic poster came of age. Starting with monochrome typographic flysheets of the 1830s, issued mainly by publishing houses and theatres, and culminating in more ebullient, color designs of the 1890s, the advertising poster totally transformed the urban scene, being displayed not just on city walls and omnibuses, in shops and cafes, but also in galleries and exhibitions (Jobling, Crowley 77).

In the late 19th century, posters were everywhere, ranging from the gallery to the street. A key figure in the history of posters and printmaking was Jules Cheret. He was a French artist who experimented with color printing techniques while in London, but established a new color style when he came back to Paris. Cheret had a pivotal role in color lithography and his posters transcended categories of taste by bringing art to the streets (Jobling, Crowley 78). His ability to

create art that could work in gallery settings as well as in urban environments is admirable.

Because of the boom of color lithographic advertising posters in the late 19th century, it helped pave the way for various posters in the 20th century, like morale boosting posters in the 1920s and 30s, as well as propaganda posters created during World War II.

In Chicago during the early 1920s, Charles Mather of The Mather Company, created “Constructive Organization Posters,” which were intended to inspire workers to do their best. The posters were to be placed on office and factory walls in order to spread motivational messages to the workers. Mather sold these posters by subscription and produced over three hundred different posters from 1923 until 1929 (Schiller). When the stock market crashed in October of 1929, his series ended abruptly. By January of 1930, jobs were difficult to find and employers didn’t have the funds or reasons to motivate the workers like they had in the Twenties (Made in America: The Mather Work Incentive Posters). Despite its abrupt end, The Mather Company is a great early example of posters specifically created to help inspire workers. Another great example of motivational posters in the workplace came from British firm Parker-Holladay in the 1920s. The firm created a fictional character named Bill Jones, who offered friendly advice to office workers by using colorful lithographic posters with motivational and straightforward suggestions. Bill Jones posters were exported to both the United States and Canada during the Twenties so the message of encouraging workers in the office setting could develop success. In a Bill Jones poster example, it reads, “Objective Thinking Insures Results. It’s the will to do that counts.” The poster shows a businessman staring at a piece of paper that says, “I can. I will. I’ll lead the list. I’ll be a record breaker” (McKay). This poster definitely could have sparked motivation if an office worker saw it. Perhaps they felt a task in the office was impossible. Seeing

a message like this would encourage them to try their best using positive reinforcement. When looking at these 1920s posters from a 21st century perspective, they still offer a motivational message. Although the visuals of these posters may seem dated, the messages that they offer the viewer are everlasting and can be applied to everyday life, whether in or out of the office. The theme of motivational posters continued into the 1930s and 40s, and grew in popularity in the form of propaganda posters.

During World War II, posters were everywhere, spreading propaganda and various messages to the world. Many of these posters motivated the viewer to do various tasks, like supporting their troops, buying war bonds, recycling metal, and rationing food. Some posters also encouraged the viewer and helped boost morale during a time of dire need. Two examples of morale boosting, motivational posters from the World War II era were the *We Can Do It!* poster (frequently referred to as Rosie the Riveter) from the United States and the *Keep Calm & Carry On* poster from Great Britain. J. Howard Miller's *We Can Do It!* poster is without a doubt one of the most iconic posters to come out of the World War II era. The Westinghouse War Production Co-ordinating Committee produced the poster in 1942. It portrays Rosie the Riveter, a strong, confident, and independent woman lifting her shirtsleeve and showing her bicep to the viewer. She is wearing a denim shirt, has a red and white polka dot bandana around her head, and gazes powerfully at the viewer while still looking beautiful. The poster was introduced as a symbol of patriotic womanhood (Powers of Persuasion). The phrase, *We Can Do It!*, is extremely rousing and inspirational. It was directed to women at the time as a way of saying, "Yes, we *can* do it. Even though men are over seas fighting, we can do our part too." This poster helped motivate

women to join the workforce at the time, and it helped spur a movement of women striving for equality in the future.

Across the Atlantic Ocean, Britain had its own concerns regarding the war. For Britain in the spring of 1939, war against Germany was inevitable. Because of the impending fate of Great Britain, the British Government's Ministry of Information commissioned propaganda posters that could be distributed throughout the country at the beginning of the war. The intention of these commissioned posters was to reassure the public and boost their morale in dark times (Keep Calm And Carry On - Home of the Original Keep Calm Poster). Surprisingly, the now popular Keep Calm and Carry On poster was never actually put on public display because that particular poster was to be used only in the event of an invasion by Germany. Because the British were victorious against Germany in the Battle of Britain, the poster was destroyed. Despite being disposed of, a few posters did survive, but they wouldn't resurface until decades later. In the year 2000, Stuart and Mary Manley, owners of a second-hand bookstore outside of London, rediscovered the Keep Calm and Carry On poster in a box in their store's attic. They both loved the poster so much that they framed it and put it on display in their shop. The poster was so popular with customers that they decided to sell reproductions (Keep Calm And Carry On - Home of the Original Keep Calm Poster). Although the poster was never on display for the British public during World War II, it has had a major cultural impact after resurfacing nearly sixty years after its creation. The Keep Calm & Carry On poster has become very popular in recent years and can be commonly found printed on coffee mugs, t-shirts, and almost any product imaginable. The message is simple, timeless, and relates to so many people, which has helped it become so successful. No matter how tough your life can get, just remember to keep calm and carry on.

A contemporary artist that creates posters with simple, clear statements is Anthony Burrill. I encountered his pieces at the Cooper Hewitt Design Museum in New York and was immediately drawn to them. As stated in an article from Crack Magazine, “Anthony Burrill’s posters communicate both vocally and visually. Steeped in simplicity, yet traditionally and complexly produced, Burrill’s use of words make them both explosively warming and completely beautiful” (Hawkins). His poster *Work Hard and Be Nice to People* is one of his most successful pieces and was one of my personal favorites when I saw his artwork in New York. The message is clear, simple, and it brought a smile to my face. His use of traditional printing techniques is admirable, especially in this day in technology. Although I’m not using woodblock techniques for my senior thesis project, I am creating my posters from an original sketch and drawing inspiration from the textures in Burrill’s work. By using Photoshop, I make the letters look a bit distressed to give the illusion of being hand made. Burrill’s work is straightforward in design and draws inspiration from various subjects. “When looking at his posters you are reminded of road signs, public information films, tube maps, war posters, protests, motivational speeches, street art and shop front eye-candy. They remind of both the visuals that we take for granted in our everyday life and typography that makes us stop and pay attention” (Hawkins). Burrill’s work is simple, yet powerful and his inspiration from attention grabbing street art is apparent.

Similar to posters, bumper stickers are also a growing art form on the street. Catherine Tedform of St. Lawrence University’s Art Gallery writes,

Seen at eye level or just beyond reach, stickers are ubiquitous in urban centers around the world, gracing almost every imaginable surface of the built environment. Situated metaphorically at the busy intersection of imagery and content—and informed by history,

mass media, commerce, and pop culture—stickers address both the personal and the political.

If you were to look in any urban environments, you are more than likely to encounter bumper sticker street art. This art form is quick and simple. Samantha Storey of the New York Times writes, “Inspired by graffiti, posters and the communal culture of the web, stickers are gaining wide attention as an artistic phenomenon, academics and practitioners say. Hand-drawn, stenciled or screen-printed, the images float on the Internet, available for downloading, printing and pasting in ways that the creators could only have imagined” (Storey). Storey also interviewed Alice Twemlow who at the time was the Program Director at the American Institute of Graphic Arts. Twemlow explains, “It [stickers] work particularly well in walking cities. Walking brings intimate encounters with the stickers that could not be experienced while driving. There is also an immediacy with which people can respond” (Storey). Currently, sticker street art is having a similar impact that posters had in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Just last week, I was walking through San Francisco taking pictures. At nearly every street corner, pole, or blank wall, I encountered a bumper sticker. It has successfully grown as an art form, and there are many contemporary artists who are using the stickers’ accessibility to their advantage.

Like the historical examples I have previously mentioned, there are many contemporary artists that have created projects with the intention of boosting the morale of the viewer. Artist and designer Matthew Hoffman created the You Are Beautiful Project when he moved to Chicago in 2003. His intention was to physically spread some love using bumper stickers with the phrase “You Are Beautiful” on them. Little did he know that his good intention would become a worldwide movement (HuffPost OWN). On the You Are Beautiful project’s website, it says

It began simply with 100 stickers. In the past decade over a half million stickers have traveled around our globe. You Are Beautiful has evolved into block long murals, public installations, and exhibitions at cultural institutions involving thousands of artists. The history is rich, but the message remains clear. Stay strong, and never forget: You Are Beautiful (Hoffman).

The project has evolved into a worldwide phenomenon and has had both simple and extremely powerful affects on the public. In an interview with The Huffington Post and the Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN) Hoffman explains, "The reaction was surprisingly positive. It just gave people a smile and a little extra burst of energy." Later on, Hoffman explains how the project struck a deeper meaning for one particular individual. "Someone sent a photo of a sticker that they put on the edge of a bridge where a friend had committed suicide a year ago, to sort of be there for the next person that's thinking about that. I don't know if I had really taken into account the magnitude that the simple message could have. At that moment, it really blew me away" (HuffPost OWN). Hoffman's project has expanded to murals and art installations all around the world and it is still going strong after ten years. His simple message is one that everyone deserves to hear.

Following in Hoffman's footsteps, Notes For Anyone is another positive street art campaign that was created by artist, Michael Pecirno. Pecirno describes his work as "guerilla positivity", and he started it by attaching laminated posters with positive messages to street lamps and parking signs throughout Chicago in 2011. The average American sees approximately 5,000 advertisements on a daily basis (Notes for Anyone). The purpose of 'Notes for Anyone' is to, "break into that endless stream of commercial communication with a series of thought-

provoking messages that let people reflect on their own lives in a positive way” (Hupkes). His project spread quickly and was a part of the Billboard Art Project, which is a nonprofit that transforms billboards into a platform of art. Pecirno’s messages have been temporarily posted up with the Billboard Art Project in Chicago, Baton Rouge, and San Bernardino (Notes for Anyone). Pecirno’s take on guerilla positivity art is a great way to break the monotony of advertising. Both Hoffman and Pecirno have created amazing positive street art campaigns that are simple in design, but provide a powerful, impacting, and positive message to the viewer.

Anthony Burrill is another contemporary artist who inspired my process. His use of traditional printing techniques is admirable, especially in this day in technology. Although I’m not using woodblock techniques for my senior thesis project, I am creating my posters from an original sketch and drawing inspiration from the textures in Burrill’s work. I drew a lot of inspiration from the hand made printed quality of his work and incorporated it into my thesis.

Contemporary hand lettering artists Mary Kate McDevitt and Sean McCabe acted as major inspirations regarding the style and aesthetic of the lettering that I created for my poster and sticker designs. McDevitt has a whimsical quality to her work. Her breadth of work is immense, and her variety of different lettering styles really influenced my method through the sketching process. This set of work really stimulated my choice to place bright colors as the backgrounds of my black and white hand lettered designs. I really wanted my designs to pop. Sean McCabe really inspired my style and aesthetic. His style of lettering is clean and simplistic. I also drew inspiration from the ways he layed out his designs. Mary Kate McDevitt is another hand lettering artist that I drew a lot of inspiration from.

The creation of my thesis was multileveled. Each of my six designs began as a hand lettered sketch. After finalizing these sketches, I made copies of them, inked them, and scanned them into the computer to begin the digitizing process. Using Adobe Illustrator, I made my hand lettered sketches into vector objects, that could be easily scalable and editable. After some editing and tweaking the letterforms, I incorporated a vibrant color scheme that matched the uplifting mood I was trying to portray with my designs. Once I did this, the sticker files were complete and I sent them off to be test printed for color and quality. After a color matching mishap, I finally had my three hundred stickers. It was then time to bring my designs into Photoshop to create my large-scale poster files.

With my poster designs, I wanted to mimic the aesthetic of letterpress artist Anthony Burrill as well as vintage posters from the early 20th century. I've always enjoyed textured work, and I wanted to differentiate my sticker designs from my poster designs. Also, because my sketches were turned into vector (digital), they lost some of those hand lettered, organic details. By adding in textures using a layer mask in Photoshop, I brought back in these textured details that bring back a more hand made aesthetic. The end result was a hand-lettered poster with textures that gave them added dimensionality and the handmade, personalized aesthetic I was going for.

With my senior thesis project, I hope to have a similar impact that my historical examples and contemporary art examples have had on various audiences. With phrases like, "You are Good Enough," "Everything Will Be OK," and "Keep On Going & Never Give Up," I strive to provide reassuring, positive messages to the viewer. Jules Cheret successfully created posters that could work in the gallery setting as well as the street. By creating both posters and bumper stickers, I am following in the footsteps of Cheret by creating work that can successfully make

that transition. Morale boosting posters from the 1920s helped reassure and motivate workers to do their best. World War II posters like *We Can Do It!* motivated and helped boost the morale of women during a time filled with war and turmoil. *Keep Calm and Carry On* reemerged decades after World War II and had a positive impact despite being taken out of its original context. By drawing inspiration from Anthony Burrill's woodblock posters and following in the footsteps of contemporary artists Matthew Hoffman and Michael Pecirno, I hope to successfully spread a message of positivity and hope to the public. Indeed, everyone has bad days and moments of weakness, but seeing a random positive message, whether random or otherwise, can instill a spark within that helps someone get through their day. Everyone deserves to hear that they're good enough, that they should keep on going and never give up, that they should always have hope, to relax and just breathe, to be kind to yourself, and that everything will be okay. If I can have an impact in one person's life by making them smile or helping them feel better with a reassuring message, then I know that I can make a difference.

Works Cited

- Hawkins, Thomas. "Crack Meets an Artist Making Some of the Most Iconic Imagery in Recent Years." *Crack Magazine*. Web. 20 Nov. 2013. <<http://crackmagazine.net/art/anthony-burrill/>>.
- Hoffman, Matthew. "A Simple, Powerful Message." *You Are Beautiful*. 2013. Web. 1 Nov. 2013. <<http://you-are-beautiful.com/about>>.
- HuffPost OWN. "The 'You Are Beautiful' Project: Artist Matthew Hoffman Spreads The Love." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, Inc., 22 Feb. 2013. Web. 30 Nov. 2013. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/22/you-are-beautiful-project-artist-matthew-hoffman_n_2735054.html>.
- Hupkes, Stijn. "Tiny Notes To Cheer Up Citizens On The Way." *The PopUp City*. 8 Nov. 2013. Web. 15 Nov. 2013. <<http://popupcity.net/tiny-notes-to-cheer-up-citizens-on-the-way/>>.
- Jobling, Paul, and David Crowley. *Graphic Design: Reproduction and Representation Since 1800*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1996. Print.
- "Keep Calm And Carry On - Barter Books - Home of the Original Keep Calm Poster." *KeepCalmHome.com*. Barter Books, 2007. Web. 01 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.keepcalmhome.com/about.htm>>.
- "Made in America: The Mather Work Incentive Posters." *InternationalPoster.com*. International Poster Gallery, Web. 20 Nov. 2013. <<http://www.internationalposter.com/exhibitions/made-in-america.aspx>>.
- McKay, Brett, and Kate McKay. "Vintage Business Motivational Posters from the 1920s & 1930s." *The Art of Manliness*. N.p., 12 Sept. 2012. Web. 1 Oct. 2013.
- "Notes for Anyone." *Spontaneous Interventions: Design Actions for the Common Good*. Spontaneous Interventions, 2011. Web. 30 Nov. 2013. <<http://www.spontaneousinterventions.org/project/notes-for-anyone>>.
- "Powers of Persuasion - Poster Art of World War II." *Powers of Persuasion*. National Archives and Records Administration. Web. 20 Nov. 2013. <http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/powers_of_persuasion/its_a_womans_war_too/its_a_womans_war_too.html>.
- Schiller, Joyce K. "Motivating Workers." *The Rockwell Center for American Visual Studies*. Norman Rockwell Museum, 11 Nov. 2011. Web. 01 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.rockwell-center.org/exploring-illustration/motivating-workers/>>.
- Stepanyuk, Mykola. "Bumper Stickers Art – History and Trends." *Cruzine*. 4 Oct. 2010. Web. 20 Oct. 2013.
- Storey, Samantha. "Download, Peel and Stick, and All the World's a Gallery." *The New York Times*. The New York Times Company, 26 Sept. 2004. Web. 25 Oct. 2013.
- The Story of Keep Calm and Carry On*. *YouTube.com*. Barter Books Ltd., 28 Feb. 2012. Web. 20 Oct. 2013. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FrHkKXFRbCI>>.
- Timmers, Margaret, ed. *The Power of the Poster*. London: V&A Publications, 1998. Print.
- "You Are Beautiful – Street Art." *One Small Seed*. One Small Seed South Africa, 10 Jan. 2012. Web. 20 Oct. 2013. <<http://www.onesmallseed.com/2012/01/you-are-beautiful/>>.

