



type

TYPE IN PROTEST

At its core, type is a storyteller. Letterforms deliver a message. And such messages are perhaps at their purest in the form of community-led designs for protest.

While many of those who create signs and banners for marches and demonstrations might not call themselves graphic designers, that's exactly what they become when putting letters on placards. Each sign is a snapshot of a broader story, a message that's both highly personal and that articulates the thoughts of a wider movement. They're created in anger and in sadness, and distill exactly what the best design is all about: igniting change.

The history and development of printing and font technologies have played a huge role in shaping how protest materials are made and messages disseminated. During the mid- to latter half of the 20th century, tools like screen printing presses became more widely available than ever, and offered a perfect crossover between the arts and activism.

design by |
Caro Arredondo

copy by |
Emily Gosling

Certain sites made names for themselves by taking quick-turnaround, affordable commissions for campaigns, such as the Poster Workshop in Camden Road, London, which was open from 1968-71. Offering a walk-in service for the likes of striking workers, civil rights groups, and liberation movements such as the London Squatters Campaign, the collective ran the workshop with the aim of encouraging responses to a flurry of political and global issues like workers' rights, the Troubles in Northern Ireland, and the Vietnam War.



THE POSTER WORKSHOP
61 CAMDEN ROAD

- BELONGS TO THE PEOPLE
- NEEDS THE PEOPLE
- FIGHTS FOR THE PEOPLE

YOU'RE THE PEOPLE. USE IT

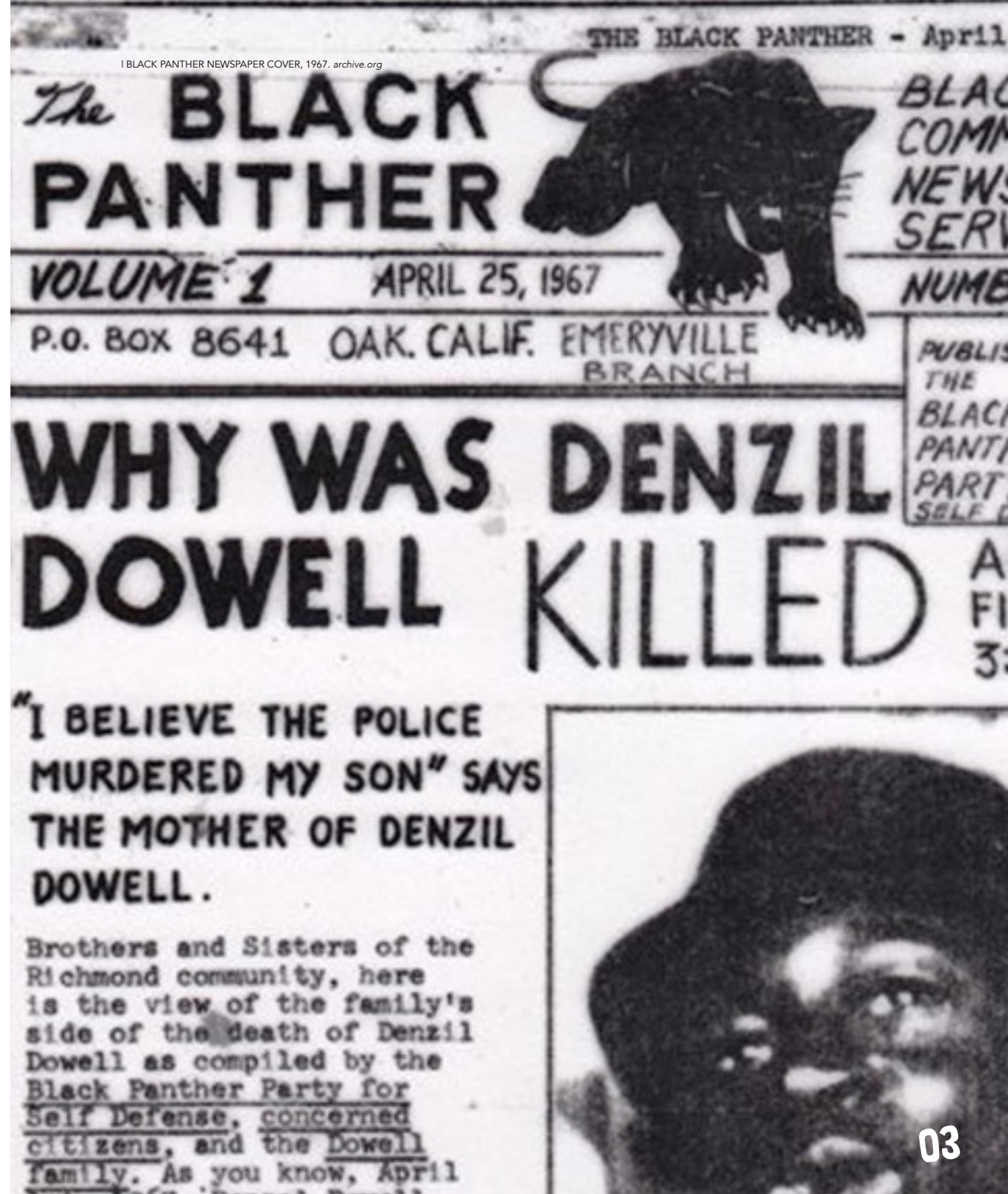
CREATIVE COMMONS



LUCIA VERNARELLI, REDSTOCKING ARCHIVES, 1970, published in 2018. eyeondesign.aiga.org

Design styles, as well as the methods that produce the final designs, are also part of a historic lineage. Take the feminist movements that occurred around the 1960s and 1970s: Many images seem to draw directly from the communications of the Civil Rights movement occurring in the same era. Artist Lucia Vernarelli used a woodblock style in her prints similar to that used by Emory Douglas in his designs for the Black Panther Party.

TERRY DISNEY, HULTON ARCHIVES, GETTY IMAGES, Squatters occupy a house in Oakfield Road, Ilford, 1969.



BLACK PANTHER NEWSPAPER COVER, 1967. archive.org

WHY WAS DENZIL DOWELL KILLED

"I BELIEVE THE POLICE MURDERED MY SON" SAYS THE MOTHER OF DENZIL DOWELL.

Brothers and Sisters of the Richmond community, here is the view of the family's side of the death of Denzil Dowell as compiled by the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, concerned citizens, and the Dowell family. As you know, April



"EACH SIGN IS A SNAPSHOT OF A BROADER STORY..."

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Over the past decade, we've seen a blurring, if not a near-total dismantling, of these distinctions. Since the advent of digital technology, the democratization of creative software tools has allowed a more community-minded, non-ego-centric approach to take root, with designers increasingly creating work that is open-source or freely downloadable.

One of the strengths of the Women's March Movement, for example, is its lack of branding or a particular visual identity in the way "big agencies" would define them. The movement started stateside in early 2017 in the wake of Donald Trump's inauguration, and has since grown into a global act of resistance to the American president and his misogynistic comments, embedding itself further into society and government alike.

Among the now-iconic images to emerge from the movement include Hayley Gilmore's poster "A woman's place is in the resistance," bearing bold, red, all-caps lettering, and Deva Pardue's "Femme Fists" symbol.



I UNSPLASH, The Women's March on Washington, 2017

Another icon to emerge from the movement is the “Nasty Woman” t-shirt from self-taught designer Amanda Brinkman. Her design uses simple black letters to turn Trump’s “nasty woman” insult, which he threw at Hillary Clinton during one of their 2016 presidential debates, into a cute and defiant icon on a t-shirt sold to raise funds for Planned Parenthood. “I coupled [the phrase] with this pink heart because I thought that was funny and it was really antithetical to the statement,” she told Forbes. This collection of symbols makes for a plurality of visual “voices,” allowing the Women’s March umbrella to encompass a wide family of causes and organizations.

Design for activism is increasingly taking the form of open-sourced assets, created and disseminated online for anyone to use. One of the most famous recent examples is Shepard Fairey’s “We the People” poster series, which aims “to combat the rising power of nationalism, bigotry, and intolerance” and is free for all to save and use.

“Professional designers see themselves as [relinquishing] ownership or releasing the copyright as they realize the greater impact they can have if they let their work spread—not just through technology, but through protest,” Design Museum curator Margaret Cabbage told Eye on Design. “It’s a big shift, and shows graphic design’s impact in spreading and sharing a message. They want people to actually use it.”



| AMANDA BRINKMAN, “Nasty Woman” t-shirt, shrillsociety.com



And in some cases, the fonts themselves can be a form of activism—exemplified by the work of Vocal Type. Founded in 2016 by Tré Seals alongside his Maryland-based eponymous studio, Vocal Type was initially born of frustration. Seals was searching online for inspiration for an identity project and realized, again, that everything he saw “looked the same.” Perhaps, he reasoned, this was because of designers’ “obsession with grids and perfection,” but in reality, it largely boiled down to the industry’s racial homogeneity.

Looking into the stats, Seals found that only 3 to 3.5 percent of all practicing designers in America are Black. This discovery suddenly made him understand why such a “singular perspective” both in approach and design aesthetics has dominated. “A lack of diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender, has led to a lack of diversity in thought, systems (like education), ideas, and, most importantly, creations,” Seals says.

Further inspired by encouraging words from Dr. Cheryl D. Holmes-Miller, the author of a PRINT magazine piece titled “Black Designers: Still Missing in Action,” he set about creating a type platform not only founded and creatively helmed by a Black man, but one that sells inherently politicized typefaces.

Broadly speaking, Vocal Type’s aim is to diversify design by creating typefaces that highlight a piece of history from a specific underrepresented race, ethnicity, or gender. Each release is a vital story told through design’s most intrinsic building blocks: letterforms. These include Martin, named after Martin Luther King; William, named after activist W.E.B. Du Bois; and Ruben, inspired by the National Chicano Moratorium movement, which protested the Vietnam War. Vocal’s most recent release is Marsha, named after Marsha P. Johnson, a Black transgender woman who was one of the most prominent figures in the Stonewall uprising of 1969.

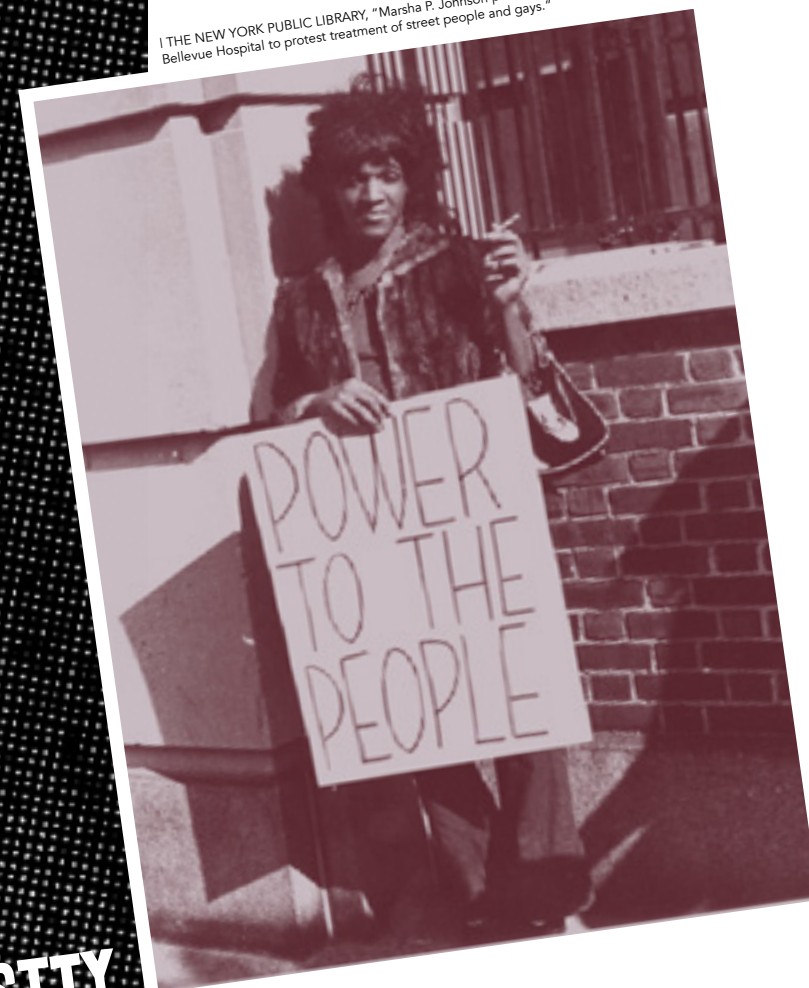
**“A LACK OF DIVERSITY
IN TERMS OF RACE,
ETHNICITY, AND GENDER,
HAS LED TO**

I WILL CHOOSE WHAT I AM.

**A LACK
OF DIVERSITY
SYSTEMS (LIKE EDUCATION),
IDEAS, AND, MOST IMPORTANTLY
CREATIONS.”**

1 JONATHAN SANGSTER, “Choose” is a poster campaign celebrating a person’s ability and autonomy in determining their own identity. These pieces were designed using the typeface Bayard, by Vocal Type Co.

1 THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY, “Marsha P. Johnson pickets Bellevue Hospital to protest treatment of street people and gays.”





MANUSCRIPTS AND ARCHIVES DIVISION,
THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY. "Stonewall
Inn" (1969), digitalcollections.nypl.org



COPY COURTESY OF vocaltype.co/history-of/marsha

The 1960s and preceding decades were not welcoming times for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) Americans. For instance, solicitation of same-sex relations was illegal in New York City.

For such reasons, LGBT individuals flocked to gay bars and clubs, places of refuge where they could express themselves openly and socialize without worry.

The Stonewall Inn, often shortened to Stonewall, is a gay bar and recreational tavern in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of Lower Manhattan, New York City, and the site of the Stonewall riots of 1969, which is widely considered to be the single most important event leading to the gay liberation movement and the modern fight for LGBT rights in the United States.

This typeface is inspired by the vertical sign that once hung outside of Stonewall, and named after Marsha P. Johnson. Marsha was an African-American, transgender woman from New Jersey, whose activism in the 1960's and 70's made her one of the most prominent figures in the Stonewall uprising of 1969.

At this time, being gay was classified as a mental illness in the United States. Gay people were regularly threatened and beaten by police, and were shunned by many in society. Marsha was a self-declared drag queen, and said the "p" in her name stood for "Pay it no mind" - a phrase she used when people commented negatively on her appearance or life choices. *

FRED W. MCDARRAH,
GETTY IMAGES, Outside
the Stonewall Inn during
the week of riots in June 1969.
vocaltype.co

| BRETTMAN ARCHIVES, GETTY IMAGES, Soldiers At Civil Rights Protest



The "I Am a Man" posters and placards generated for the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers' strike featured oddly proportioned yet memorable sans serif capital A's and M's. These imperfect letterforms are reflected in the Black Lives Matter fonts designed by art director and user experience designer Don Lee, with copywriter Cody Turk. After a Black Lives Matter mural appeared overnight on a street leading to the White House in June 2020, Lee used the lettering of the mural as the starting point for the first font in the package, keeping the rough qualities and imperfections of type painted on asphalt intact while creating a highly visible, legible alphabet.

"We produced the font to inspire designers and represent the energy of the BLM movement," says Lee. "Creating a design asset as a creative, social open-source project is important to spread the word and contribute to a brand image or story that makes the issue more understandable for a wide audience."

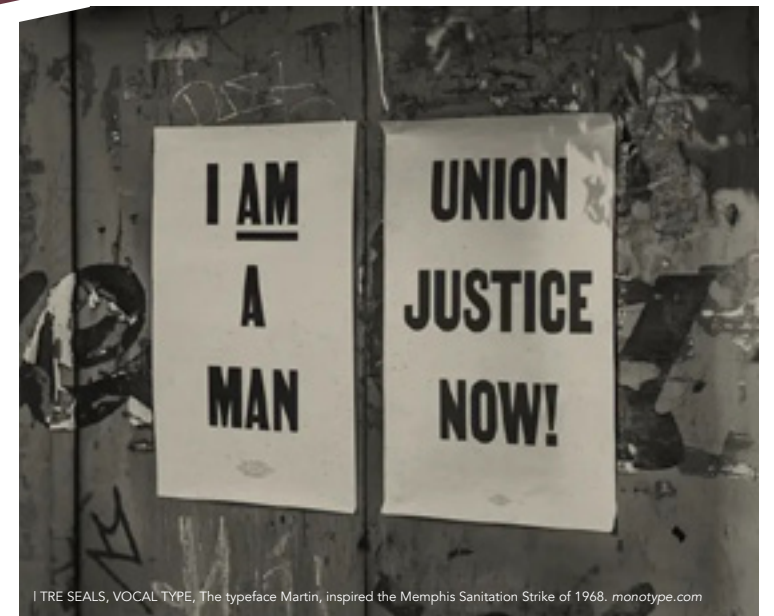
| TASOS KATOPODIS, GETTY IMAGES, People walked down 16th Street after volunteers, with permission from the city, painted "Black Lives Matter" on the street near the White House on Friday.



| ROBERT ABBOTT SENGSTACKE, GETTY IMAGES, A group of demonstrators holding signs march in protest soon after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Memphis, TN, April 1968.



| BOB ADELMAN, taken on April 8, 1968 at the memorial march in Memphis, Tennessee for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who had been assassinated just days before



| TRE SEALS, VOCAL TYPE, The typeface Martin, inspired the Memphis Sanitation Strike of 1968. monotype.com

WONKY CURVES AND
BOWL SIZES

SOME CHARACTERS
MAY BE CUT-OFF

UNEVEN LINE
WEIGHTS

BOLD AND ALL CAP
CHARACTERS

BLACK LIVES MATTER

SLANTED AND UNEVEN
BASELINES

**ANATOMY OF
PROTEST
TYPEFACES**

CREATIVE COMMONS, Black Lives Matter mural in DC

While most protest materials are created in ways that are far from precious—hastily assembled, not usually expecting to last more than one march—the Design Museum’s 2018 exhibition *Hope to Nope: Graphics and Politics 2008-18* framed such pieces in the unusual context of a firmly “design” museum setting.

**"THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF
CREATIVE SOFTWARE TOOLS**

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Unsurprisingly, many of the stars of the show were type-centric, such as the artist Dread Scott’s flag in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. The piece replicates a flag flown from the national headquarters of the civil rights organization National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) between 1920 and 1938, to mark lynchings of black people in the US. Scott’s flag, created in response to the police shooting of unarmed Black man Walter Scott in 2015, uses the same striking, white, all-caps letterforms contrasting a black background, reading “A man was lynched by police yesterday.”

The artist has described his work as having a number of purposes: highlighting the role of police shootings in the past few decades in “terrorizing black people,” just as lynching had in the past; creating public discourse around such racist actions; and providing a symbol of hope for change.



JACK SHAIMAN GALLERY, DREAD SCOTT "A Man Was Lynched by The Police Yesterday," dreadscott.net

I MPI / GETTY IMAGES, A flag hangs outside the headquarters of the NAACP in 1938, bearing the words "A Man was Lynched Yesterday"

! WIKICOMMONS, protesters hold up banners during the "Occupy Wall Street" demonstrations in 2011

Today, the widespread availability of digital design tools means it's increasingly easy for non-designers to make flashy protest materials. But handwritten signage works in powerful ways, and performs a different role than "good" graphic design characterized by technical wizardry and polished, professional fonts. Nothing captures the passion and spontaneity of protest like handmade signage. Often the urgency behind a protest means you just have to grab a marker and start writing, and for the most part, the typography of protest today remains staunchly in the handwritten camp.



It's noteworthy that handlettering retains such a potent and prominent place in protest, considering today's activism exists as much online as on the streets, with graphics and typographic slogans proliferating as socially shareable (and pleasingly virtue-signaling) gifs, digital posters and so on. As *The New York Times* put it, referring to the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations of 2011, "given the handwritten cardboard signs that have become the signature of the Occupy movement, you wonder if there is still a role for the poster in making messages go viral today."

As Dori Tunstall pointed out, these hand-drawn signs are not officially "design," yet offer some of the most memorable articulations of anger and hope we're likely to see in any civilian-led protest. They also create lasting impact when photographed: Striking letterforms hand-printed or written onto whatever protesters can find—card, paper, their own bodies and faces, or (in COVID times) facemasks—make for powerful images.

This is something David Holbrook, who photographed one of the recent Black Lives Matter protests in London, can attest. His eye is drawn first to people, he says, then messages, then largely to placards that offer a certain degree of aesthetically pleasing symmetry. "You've got a certain amount of catchphrases like 'Silence is Violence,' then obviously 'Black Lives Matter.' Signs that are completely handmade instantly show that someone's put their time into it. They can be so expressive.

"The block text means you can really see it," he adds. "It's all in capitals, it wants to be heard—you get the impression these things are being shouted."

COLOPHON

typefaces |

body |

Avenir Medium 8 : 11

photo sources |

Avenir Book 5 : 7

titles & pull quotes |

Black Lives Matter

cover |

Bayard 200 : 240

VTC Marsha 100 : 120

design by |

Caro Arredondo

copy by |

Emily Gosling

originally published on |

monotype.com

cover photo |

UNSPLASH, The March
on Washington, 1963

