

**call to action!**  
**join sit-down demonstration**  
**outside Ministry of Defence**  
**18th Feb 1961**  
**to demand:** the scrapping of the Polaris agreement  
 unconditional and immediate nuclear disarmament

**assemble** ■ 12.30 pm Speakers' Corner, Marble Arch  
**march leaves** ■ 1.0 pm  
**rally.** ■ 2.0 pm Trafalgar Square

**speakers**  
 Earl Russell OM FRs, Rev Michael Scott  
 Sir Herbert Read, Hugh MacDiarmid  
 who will lead the march down  
 Whitehall, Parliament Square,  
 George Street, to the  
 Ministry of Defence (entrance off  
 George Street facing St James)

Robin Fior, Designer, V&A, Co. Ltd. Lanes St. W.C.1, Printers

all enquiries to the Secretary Committee of 100  
 13 Goodwin Street N4 ARChway 1239

Eye 32,  
 Summer 1999

## ROBIN FIOR: REVOLUTIONARY LANGUAGE

'A revolutionary graphic language must seek to expose the meaning by presenting a chain of ideas, images, structures in as much of their complexity as is economically feasible.' So wrote Robin Fior in 1972.

Throughout his career, Fior has maintained that design is a political activity. His recent work is less obviously political than that of previous decades, but in its emphasis on language and structure it has lost none of his radical attitudes. Nor are his critical insights any less penetrating. As a politically committed designer in London in the 1960s, Fior tried to find a graphic idiom that suited radical messages. Self-taught, he was uninhibited in his eclectic experiments. In 1973, he moved to Lisbon. Two years later, the Portuguese revolution made his expertise and critical intelligence suddenly in demand. Since then, he has remained a significant figure in the Portuguese cultural community, both as a designer and critical presence.

Fior's design idioms are marked by his unusual route to graphic design. Born in London in 1935, he developed at school an interest in calligraphy and learned to set metal type by hand (an experience that gave him a lasting aversion to Eric Gill's Perpetua). After Oxford, where he studied English but did little work, he joined the law firm of his father and, as he prepared for law exams, immersed himself in left-wing politics.

Through his association with various socialist groups, Fior drifted into the world of print. The layout of *Cab News*, a journal for London taxi drivers, gave him the first chance to combine political and typographic activity. Radical organisations and trade unions began to ask for his advice. With no formal training in art or design, Fior decided to learn about printing by joining the now legendary evening classes at the Central School run by Edward Wright in 1955. Mainly improvising with large sizes of type inked up in colour on a proofing press, this was in no sense a professional education. Fior learnt more from the anarchist printer Desmond Jeffery, whose workshop was near his father's office. Jeffery was then one of the very few in Britain who designed in a modern, Tschichold-inspired idiom, importing type from Continental foundries. (He was the sole user of Akzidenz in Britain, for example.) Jeffery taught in the Design department of the London School of Printing and Graphic Arts, where Fior – one of a handful of young Modernist typographers available – began teaching, half a day a week, in 1958.

At the end of the 1950s, British politics and society were changing rapidly. However, the reactionary Conservative government, identified with Cold-War militarism, did not reflect the new mood. Apart from party politics, the most intensely supported movement was the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). Fior became a member of the CND's Committee of 100, and was among those arrested for sedition. The Campaign's views were publicised by demonstrations, direct action – invading military installations – and in printed propaganda. Designers

Facing page:  
 poster calling supporters to  
 a demonstration against  
 nuclear weapons,  
 printed letterpress in  
 black and blue on brown  
 kraft paper,  
 1961

contributed by producing posters and banners to be carried on marches and at meetings. (Fior persuaded Ken Garland to design a poster for the Easter 1962 anti-nuclear march from Aldermaston to London, which led to Garland's continued work for CND over the next four years).

Fior became art editor of the independent left-wing Pluto Press. He designed its symbol and a series of books and their jackets. Connected to a variety of socialist groups, he art-edited several magazines, and his design of the weekly *Peace News* had a lasting influence – notably on the *Guardian* two decades later. He was one of the 22 signatories (along with Germano Facetti, the *Architectural Review*'s William Slack, Wright and Garland) to the original 'First Things First' manifesto, published in 1964 in *CND Journal*, *Guardian*, *Design* and *Ark*.

By May 1968, high hopes were raised for the radical left. The student riots in Paris that almost brought down the government were echoed in London, where the enthusiasm was reflected in the short-lived, crudely produced newsprint weekly *Black Dwarf*, designed by Fior. He also designed covers for *International Socialism*.

The peace movement's activities focussed on opposition to the war in Vietnam, where it found itself allied with the underground press, whose breadth and graphic language Fior vividly and brilliantly described (in an article for *The Designer*, which took visual references from their original sources) as 'a spray-on soft-edge mirror surface defined by electric rock music, drugs, communes, plug-in, sex, sexism, geodesics, mysticism, orgasms, macrobiotics, ecology, doing one's own thing, improvisation, astrology and – Revolution...' With the sexual revolution of the 1960s and continuing student militancy, it was not completely absurd that along with many others John Lennon could sing that we were 'talkin' 'bout a revolution' or that there should be a Revolution night club with a blow-torched letterhead.

In this atmosphere, Fior was bound to ask himself what a 'revolutionary' typography might be. An obvious precedent was the practice of early Soviet designers, and the left-wing European pioneers of the 1920s such as Paul Schuitema, whose work was brought to British designers' attention by *Typographica* and by the Swiss magazine *Neue Grafik*. Many of the founding fathers of the tradition of Modernist typography in Switzerland, such as Richard Paul Lohse and Max Bill, were left-wing. In 1960, Fior travelled to Zurich to see Swiss design first-hand. The formal qualities of its graphics represented the objectivity to which Fior aspired, and from a political standpoint he identified its three-column grid – giving equal value to French, German and Italian – as expressing a tolerance of the country's linguistic, religious and cultural communities.

At the same time as Britain's outlook in the 1960s became less insular, designers were drawn to American culture, high and low. Fior, an insatiable reader of magazines from around the world, was attracted by the New Advertising in the US. He admired its intellectual and technical brilliance: every word of the copy was considered and integrated into a graphic ensemble, aided by the craftsmanship of a service industry of typographers, photographers and photoengravers.



Peace News,  
letterpress,  
1962



Slogan from  
a demonstrators' chant,  
cover in black and red for  
a short-lived radical journal,  
*Black Dwarf*,  
1968



in the bag



books for keeping

Two advertisements  
for Becker's Bewoid  
paper additives,  
concept and copywriting  
by the designer,  
1963



Press intrusion on privacy:  
photomontage illustration,  
*New Society*,  
1967

To meet the people who made New York advertising, Fior had no need to go there. In the early 1960s, a group of brilliant young American designers arrived in London. Of these gurus, Fior came to know Robert Brownjohn, persuading him to lecture at the London College of Printing, and also Bob Gill. Apart from their ideas, Fior admired the informality – and hence the accessibility – of Gill's illustration. An anti-apartheid poster denouncing a tour by the white South African cricket team in 1970 is Fior's homage to this approach.

That New York advertising might have a 'revolutionary' application is a nuance that only Fior's reasoning can explain: its refinement was not what he was aiming for in his own work, often produced on the kitchen table. He aspired to something less finished, that was open for response, that would allow more to be said.

Fior's print advertisements for the Becker company, which supplied chemicals to the papermaking industry, borrowed the sharpness of their headlines and their visual ingenuity from New York. But Fior claims that the copy is typeset in a way more typical of the (lower) standards of the British print trade. Poor technical standards had the effect of making a *grafica povera* – an image of amateurishness implying solid conviction, whereas a more polished result might suggest power, money and authority. On the contrary, the effect of printing on cheap, off-white paper, on wrapping paper or on the wrong side of tinted paper using worn wood type, was aesthetic, merely betraying the influence of the Dutch typographer Willem Sandberg. This 'roughness', a solution to which Fior returned over three decades in trying to make messages 'open' and accessible, was common internationally. In Paris, it was developed expertly in the neo-Polish, Communist Party work of Grapus. For Marxist designers – even in Switzerland – the gloss of technically perfect print reflected the human and material waste of capitalism. They reacted with often coarse, graphic imprecision.

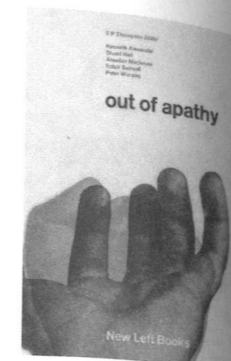
Technology was moving print rapidly in the direction of flawless reproduction, with full colour printing on impeccable surfaces. Letterpress was giving way to offset lithography, and text composition moving from metal to film. The design process was changing, and so was the thinking behind it. Letterpress required typographic layouts, made by tracing each letter (often even in the smallest sizes) and this had two effects. First, the laboriousness of the process engraved the shape of letters on the designer's unconscious. Second, it necessitated the rough layout of the words before this task began. The shape of the message was determined first. The choice of typeface came later. This is not a common procedure in screen-based design, as Fior suggested in 1995 to Ico Grada delegates in Lisbon: 'Mac™anization Takes Command.' For him, an analysis of the grammatical structure of the message will determine its graphic form. The structure into which the message is integrated can engage the reader actively in revealing the message – or parts of it – in a sequence, as shown by his recent work.

In his *Designer* article, Fior asserts that if the art director 'pretends he is selecting and assembling at random, that he sees all images as equally "great" – or value-free, if he claims therefore to be non-political

or apolitical, he lies'. His own professional activity extended beyond radical politics: his 'revolutionary graphic language' also had a place in a design practice apparently at odds with London's 'Swinging Sixties'. His practice RFDO – Robin Fior Design Office – was a few yards from Carnaby Street, down a side street, above architects' offices. With only an occasional part-timer for assistance, Fior took on whatever commissions came his way. These jobs included signage, catalogues for museums and television titles. Designing advertisements, such as those for Becker, was unusual, and he used his position on the committee of the Design and Art Directors Association (D&AD) to defend the interests of design against the advertising agency lobby. At the time, he notoriously asked the newly formed Pentagram why they didn't call themselves 'Pentecost': then clients would know they'd have to pay five times what they expected. For a time in the late 1960s, he was art director for the educational publishers Nelsons and worked on the *Guardian* feature pages while continuing to teach at least one day a week.

As mentioned above, Fior moved to Lisbon in 1973 – after a chance meeting with Portuguese students in London and some trouble with the tax authorities. In doing so he was not leaving his politics behind. At Praxis, the Lisbon-based design cooperative where he took up a salaried post, one member, as a Communist, had spent 13 years in jail.

A year after Fior's arrival in Portugal, an army coup ended Salazar's nationalist dictatorship, establishing the country as a Western European democracy. From an observer of the revolution, Fior became an active participant. A liberal Catholic group, supporting the drive to independence for the country's African colonies, commissioned Fior to design posters as a stimulus to government action. His British experience with similar jobs gave him the confidence to produce dramatic and startlingly simple designs based on the colonies' national flags.



Open hand to receive (in black), clenched fist for determination (in red), book cover, 1965

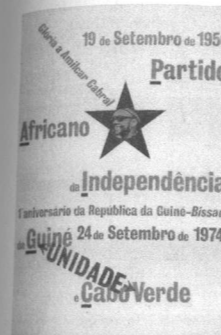


Book cover, Pluto Press, printed maroon and olive, 1972

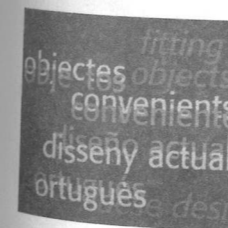
Poster for the Frelimo party in Mozambique demanding independence, 1975



Esquerda Socialista, weekly newsprint journal, 1974



Poster for PAIGC party supporting independent status for a united Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, 1974



Cover of catalogue of contemporary Portuguese design, three-colour printing, 1997

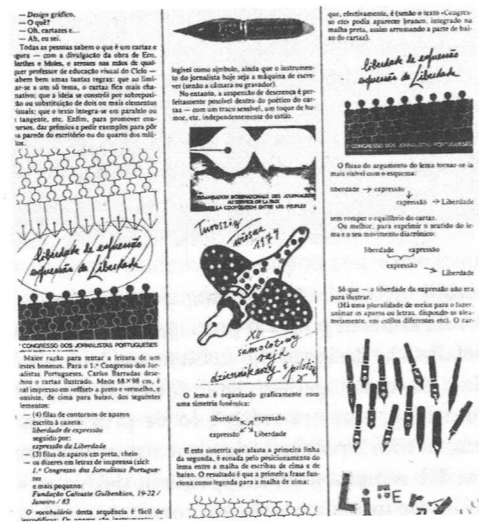
In the period before the first Portuguese elections in 1975, Fior was in demand for all kinds of political propaganda. For the Movimento de Esquerda Socialista he designed the emblem and laid out a weekly broadsheet magazine, 'thrown together', from four o'clock in the afternoon to four in the morning, 'camera-ready', to be printed on a newspaper's presses. Several of Fior's political friends won government positions. His practice grew. He remained an independent designer, working on his own, but was active in Lisbon's design community. He was a founding member of the Portuguese Association of Designers and helped with the establishment of the Centro de Arte e Comunicação Visual (Ar.Co), the school where he has taught for 25 years and designed many of its publications and announcements.

The most significant aspect of Fior's work in Portugal has been his further engagement with the role of language in graphics. Thinking in both English and Portuguese has emphasised this concern, and bilingual jobs have given him the opportunity of interlocking two languages so that what is common to each forms the basis of a typographic idea.

When he was in London, Fior had regularly designed catalogues for exhibitions. Invitation cards and announcements became almost a speciality: inviting, in a literal sense, to open and unfold. This tactile and dynamic involvement plays as large a part as reading in the communication, which is exposed in a series of revelations. Their physical structure, not merely the typography it carries, is a means of articulating the message. As a result, much of Fior's work – elements such as the impression of type in clay for the whole range of stationery and advertising for a ceramics conference, or the feel of the rough papers he likes to use – is not easily reproducible.

Until recently, Fior has written only occasionally. When he was first in Lisbon, he repeated the technique of his *Designer* essay in his critique of a poster for the Congress of Portuguese Journalists in 1982. He 'decodes' the visual and verbal vocabulary and then looks at the syntax –

the relations of the parts. With the photograph of a pen nib he demonstrates the graphic transformation required to convert the image into a symbol. French and Polish examples are illustrated to show the effects of style and humour. He takes apart the slogan 'Liberty of expression – expression of liberty' slogan, pointing out in a diagram – with the help of arrows and mathematical braces – that the slogan's verbal symmetry denies the causal thrust of the message, that out of freedom of expression comes liberty.



'MPLA, legitimate representative of the people of Angola [demands] complete and immediate independence'. Poster, printed black, yellow and red, 1975

Article in *Esquerda Socialista*, c.1964

Although he has a regular column about design in the monthly *Arte Iberica*, Fior's critical voice is not heard enough. 'Do we need theory? How can we make it work for us?' (He jokingly quotes a British designer saying that 'you can always recognise theory because it gives you a headache'.) He persists with questions about graphic design. At the Icoграда conference in 1995, he asked how the profession could absorb shifting frontiers – political, economic, in the arts, sciences and technology. 'How do we redefine the engineering and poetry of visual language?' Theory may be one side of Fior's activity, but on the other is the engineering and poetry of his work.

## WOLFGANG WEINGART AN ORIGINAL

Unpublished.  
Prompted by the publication  
of Weingart:  
*My Way to Typography*,  
1999

Wolfgang Weingart is an intensely original figure. His energetic enthusiasm has made him a teacher of huge influence. His anxiety for an audience, for his work, his travels, have made him a celebrity.

Weingart's story is set out in his book *My Way to Typography*, published in 1999. It is a very odd, huge document, trapped between a desire for self expression and the typographer's discipline of communicating other people's ideas. The account is valuable in revealing young designers' quite common response in the 1960s – not only in Europe – to seeing Swiss work. Weingart worked as a typesetting apprentice at a Stuttgart printer. The firm's designer had studied at the *Gewerbeschule* in Basel in the early 1950s and had worked in the office shared by Dorothea and Armin Hofmann and Karl Gerstner.

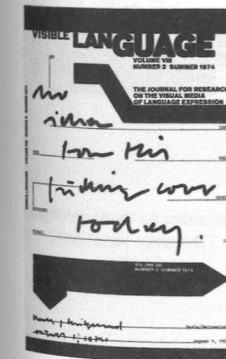
Weingart's experience in the printing trade gave him a sense of its material and potential for subversion. His anecdote of picking up a bundle of tiny metal type, tying it up and printing from it upside down is the key to much of his later work: to do the opposite of the conventional – the standard ruse of the enfant terrible – and his drive to make pictures. The happy accident was crucial to his work. When photolithography was supplanting letterpress, Weingart talks of his excitement at the effect of overlapping film: 'I discovered the intrinsic aesthetic of a new process.'

In 1963, Weingart went to Basel. He applied to be a student at the *Allgemeine Gewerbeschule*. Instead, he claims, he was offered a teaching job. This is mysterious, since he then talks of doing student tasks. He fell under Hofmann's spell.

As for typography, Weingart tells how he conceived typography as illustrated music – and doesn't miss the opportunity to mention his favourite composers by name – and 'resolved that a word or line of text would interact with the white space of the page by increasing the space between the letters, thereby increasing the rhythm of the whole'. He implies that Emil Ruder, head of the Letterpress Department at the time, would have disapproved, but only talks of Ruder's devotion to Univers by comparison with his own preference for the 'rugged' Akzidenz.

He writes of bending type material, the 'leads' used for spacing or metal 'rules' for printing lines to make curves and zigzag bends. Although he was making a nuisance of himself, Ruder allowed Weingart to work in the school's composing room, mainly on a project exploring the graphic possibilities of the letter M, which he had begun in Germany. Meanwhile he earned a living at a printer as a part-time compositor.

Weingart's interests, after letterspacing, were the repetition of words and 'further lettershape abstractions' using linocuts. In 1966, his work appeared in the German printing trade journal *Der Druckspiegel*. This was different from the kind of work – making typographical 'landscapes' – he developed later.



'No idea for this fucking cover today', a rejected idea for the cover of the American journal *Visible Language*, 1974