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# 3rd Place Contest Entry: Aesthetic Activism: Protest Art in the Delano Grape Strike

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Aesthetic Activism: Protest Art in the Delano Grape Strike  
Entry for the Kevin and Tam Ross Undergraduate Research Prize  
By Felicia Viano

The work of the United Farm Workers (UFW) in the Delano Grape Strike was bolstered by the inclusion of art as a tactic. I explored this in my senior thesis for my History major, which required extensive research through resources available through the Leatherby Libraries, as well as with other university libraries and special collections.

In writing a historiography of the period, I read books on the different aspects of the strike, including books on social movement theory, Chicano art history, and general resources about the United Farm Workers. For other secondary sources, I read many articles through online databases such as JSTOR and Academic OneFile.

In searching for secondary sources I encountered many limitations in terms of search criteria. Since the connection between the UFW and art as a social movement tactic has little prior scholarship, I adjusted the search criteria for tactics used by the UFW. This required knowledge of the terms of the UFW that I learned by reading secondary sources. Searching “United Farm Workers and art” produced no relevant results. Instead, I searched for specific tactics such as “Teatro Campesino,” (farmworker theater), and “El Malcriado” (the UFW newspaper). These terms, when coupled with other terms like “theory,” provided results that were informative and guided me to primary sources.

Finding primary sources was the most tedious and extensive research that I have ever done. When I began, I used various newspapers and databases accessed through the History Research Subject Guide. This led me to different sources available through the “Sixties, The: Primary Documents and Personal Narratives” database as well as the *New York Times* Archive and the *LA Times* Archives. While these databases were helpful the most important was shown

Aesthetic Activism: Protest Art in the Delano Grape Strike  
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to my class by Rand Boyd. The Online Archive of California led me to almost all the sources I used in my paper. The OAC led me to the Farmworker Movement Documentation Project, a platform available through the University of California, San Diego. It is a database full of personal essays written by former members of the UFW, as well as documents such as FBI reports, correspondence, and the UFW newspaper. This led me to search through manuscripts of UFW members by using the find tool to search for keywords that described what I was looking for. Examples of these keywords are “graphics shop,” “newspaper,” “posters,” and “theater.” I also listened to and transcribed oral history from UFW organizers. This process took all of the last summer as well as this previous semester.

During the summer, I took a trip to the special collections at UC Davis to look at a new collection they had that was donated by Hub Segur, a former journalist, and UFW organizer. This collection was comprised of manuscripts and journals as well as art pieces from the movement like poster and buttons. I also looked at photographs and delicate documents and had the “white glove treatment” while looking through these pieces. While looking at these documents I looked at multiple handwritten letters from Cesar Chavez to Hub Segur which was the highlight of my undergraduate research experience. Though I did not end up using these documents in my final paper, I was able to refine my research method to the process described in the last paragraph.

The sheer amount of materials available for this topic made the TRAP method necessary. Firstly I could only look at pieces that surrounded the period of the Delano Grape Boycott and Strike, or the mid to late 1960s. Relevant pieces were only those that directly discussed art tactics. Since I used mostly primary sources authority was not an issue, but if I did not use

Aesthetic Activism: Protest Art in the Delano Grape Strike  
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By Felicia Viano

primary sources I used the works of leading scholars that I learned of after surveying the literature. Accuracy did not present any issues. The purpose was always for historical knowledge and pieces were only chosen if they served my thesis. I utilized the help of Rand Boyd's library sessions as well as interlibrary loans for my primary research. The interlibrary loan was incredibly important for secondary sources that were not always available through Chapman.

This research process taught me about the discipline needed to conduct an extensive research project. I learned that creativity is important because information can be hard to find. This project fills a gap in the field and has already helped me make connections with other scholars interested in the topic, just recently after I presented my research at the Phi Alpha Theta SoCal Regional Conference I was approached by a professor who asked me to give her feedback on an article written about buttons and posters in another consumer boycott. Overall, this project taught me valuable skills that will follow me as I continue my education at law school next year, and beyond.

Aesthetic Activism:  
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The use of buttons, posters, and stickers are always thought of as fundamental to the work of social movements. While these items are made deliberately in order to publicize the work of the group, many people do not realize the extent of these types and other forms of “art.” Especially in the case of the United Farm Workers’ Delano Grape Strike, which contributed to the larger Chicano Arts movement in the 20th century as well as to the struggle for Chicano rights throughout the 1960s. In essence, the incorporation of art and artist participants is a topic that is integral to Chicano history though overlooked, and this art bolstered the work of the United Farm Workers in the Delano Grape Strike. The Delano Grape Strike was the United Farm Workers’ first major and most noteworthy campaign.

In order to understand just how influential the Delano Grape Strike was in terms of publicity, and movement outreach one has to look at how art was deliberately incorporated in the movement. The history of the incorporation of art in the United Farm Workers’ Delano Grape Strike is one that shows the ingenuity of the union in using art as a successful tactic to spread the boycott and it is reflective of social movement theory that focuses on strategic and creative action as a method of nonviolent resistance.

Creative action, in this case, can be defined as the use of art to further the movement. Art in this context took the form of protest paraphernalia: posters, music, theater, and the UFW newspaper. The UFW utilized all of these forms of creative action through a few major methods. The Taller Grafico was and still is the name of the United Farm Workers’ graphics shop. The shop which was located in the Delano UFW headquarters throughout the 1960s and 70s served as the main location for designing and printing boycott materials. The other main method of creative action was through El Teatro Campesino, the organization started by Luis Valdez which

brought small-scale theater performances to various locations throughout the country in order to raise awareness about the plight of the farmworkers.

Creative action and the methods that fall under this category have been used historically in different nonviolent campaigns by organizations and social movements. Gene Sharp, one of the most prominent scholars in the field of social movement theory, categorized specific tactics used by nonviolent social movements. Three categories very accurately describe the work of the UFW, “Symbolic Public Acts,” “Communications with a Wider Audience,” and “Drama and Music.”<sup>1</sup> These categories include the tactics of displaying flags and symbolic colors, displaying posters, and performing humorous skits, all of which can be described as creative action.

The Taller Grafico (Graphics Shop) was responsible for printing boycott materials, and was one of the main forms of distributing creative action. One union organizer, Ruben Montoya, described how he and two others who had graphics experience helped set up the shop, “About this time, Frank and Liz were talking about moving to Delano to start up Taller Grafico...a store that would sell posters, political buttons, pins, T-shirts, etc. They sold them through the mail (I laid out their first catalog and had it printed) and at union rallies.”<sup>2</sup> The Taller Grafico was also responsible for producing union materials such as *El Malcriado*, the UFW newspaper. The chief artist for the newspaper was Andrew Zermeno, whose work has become synonymous with the UFW. Zermeno created images for the UFW since 1964, including the UFW flag which is now infamously linked with the Chicano Movement. He describes his part in creating the flag that Cesar Chavez and his brother originally thought of, “Chuey came over and he knocked...and he

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<sup>1</sup> Gene Sharp, *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential*, (Boston: Porter Sargent Publishers, 2005), 52-53.

<sup>2</sup> Ruben Montoya, “Ruben Montoya 1970-1974,” (Essay, Farmworker Movement Documentation Project, 2004-2012), 1.

said ‘Look I’ve got this drawing,’ and it was on a yellow legal pad and there was this eagle...and Cesar says ‘Can you fix it?’ ‘Yeah I can fix it I can basically...all I’m gonna do is keep it like it is more or less and just work on the head, so you can have that real graphic thing.’”<sup>3</sup> The aztec eagle that was first used by the UFW became synonymous with the Chicano movement, with groups like Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA) adopting it to represent their organization. It also became a key element to many pieces of Chicano Art such as *Viva La Raza, Long Live Humanity* (1969) by Salvador Roberto Torres. Countless other Chicano art pieces show images of the UFW thereby depicting how the UFW has become integral to Chicano History, in part due to the creativity they employed in cultivating their own brand.<sup>4</sup>

The work of the UFW paved the way for the Chicano Movement, which was reflected by the use of UFW iconographies such as the Aztec eagle throughout the late 1960s and 1970s. The creative action of the UFW also inspired the Chicano Arts Movement throughout the later 20th century and their work commented on the nature of Chicano identity and how it intersected with art and culture, “Chavez served as a reminder that Chicano creative expression had a moral basis and was founded on the political struggle to overcome oppression. Chavez was an archetype, a bigger-than-life symbol of the art's origins.” It was because of the sheer creativity and groundbreaking nature of a successful movement of Chicanos that the UFW found fame in the field of social movements and art.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Andrew Zermeno, interview by the Center for the Study of Political Graphics, *Decade of Dissent; Democracy in Action 1965-1975*, Feb. 12, 2012, transcript.

<sup>4</sup>Ester Hernandez, *Sun Mad*, 1982, Smithsonian American Art Museum.

<sup>5</sup>Max Benavidez, “Cesar Chavez Nurtured Seeds of Art,” *The LA Times*, (Los Angeles, CA), Apr. 28, 1993.



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Aesthetic Activism

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Aesthetic Activism

By Felicia Viano

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