

EXHIBITION ESSAY

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Paper Trail is an exhibition of visual imagery that documents the history and creative output of Chicago's original Rainbow Coalition. Also included are photographs of the Rainbow Coalition in its early days when it included JOIN, a Chicago-based community organization comprised of activists who would later go on to form Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and Rising Up Angry. The project showcases the ways that the organizations, while situated in very disparate communities, applied remarkably similar forms of rhetoric and graphic style to visually articulate their revolutionary agendas and concerns.

The Rainbow Coalition was an alliance between the Black Panthers, The Young Lords, the Young Patriots, and Rising Up Angry that was developed in late 1969. Fred Hampton initiated the coalition soon after he attended "A United Front Against Fascism," a three-day conference that the Panthers organized in 1969 in Oakland, CA, devoted to the concept of inter-communalism. The Panthers had begun to believe in the concept of the motley crew—that people from diverse cultures and nationalities, brought together by virtue of their marginality, could be a profoundly powerful force for political change. With this idea at their core, the Rainbow Coalition became a celebration of the multitude: of difference and of connection. Looking to the Panthers for inspiration, each organization affiliated with the Rainbow Coalition was likewise incredibly strategic concerning the images they used to celebrate their own ethnic pride.

The exhibition provides a snapshot of U.S. underground militant media in its heyday, when it was not only the most effective way of disseminating information, but also a vehicle to usher in an exciting renaissance of creativity. As the colorful graphics of *The Chicago Seed* and Emory Douglas's illustrations in the *Black Community News Service* suggest, conscious attention to the mechanisms of advertising helped create strong visual metaphors and allowed the publications to be an active central location of the resistance struggle. The bold graphics gave life to ideas that were too radical for the "real world." For example, equating the caricature of "the pig" with an image of a cop allowed those being oppressed to exercise symbolic power over the authorities.

Paper Trail also offers the official "statement of purpose" for the Rainbow Coalition Council of Elders, formed in 2007 by many of the original members of the Rainbow Coalition to reengage and revise the original aims of the movement. Finally, selections of the graphic imagery crafted during the Barack Obama presidential campaign are displayed on a monitor. The energy and fervor with which citizens distributed Shepard Fairey's iconic image of Obama is impressive, as is the passionate, collective ownership with which that image has been further appropriated and even distorted.

Ultimately, the goal of *Paper Trail* is not nostalgic. But, rather, the exhibition asserts that reconnecting with and "re-presenting" this material with the benefit of some historical distance

allows us to reexamine the strategies and goals of this graphic work. Causes against which those in the original Rainbow Coalition fought—specifically inadequate access to medical care and childcare, exploitation of the working poor, the forced relocation of low-income families and minorities under the guise of “urban renewal”—remain concerns forty years later. For instance, we cannot ignore that the near west side neighborhood of Chicago, currently under massive transformation by rapid development in both private and public sectors, and the location of UIC and this exhibition, adds a context of poignancy and urgency to the need for mobilization.

Paper Trail is by no means exhaustive and is not meant as a one-to-one comparison or mapping between the historic and the contemporary. *Paper Trail* is a gathering of parallels and divergences, proposed as a fragment from a much larger ongoing text.