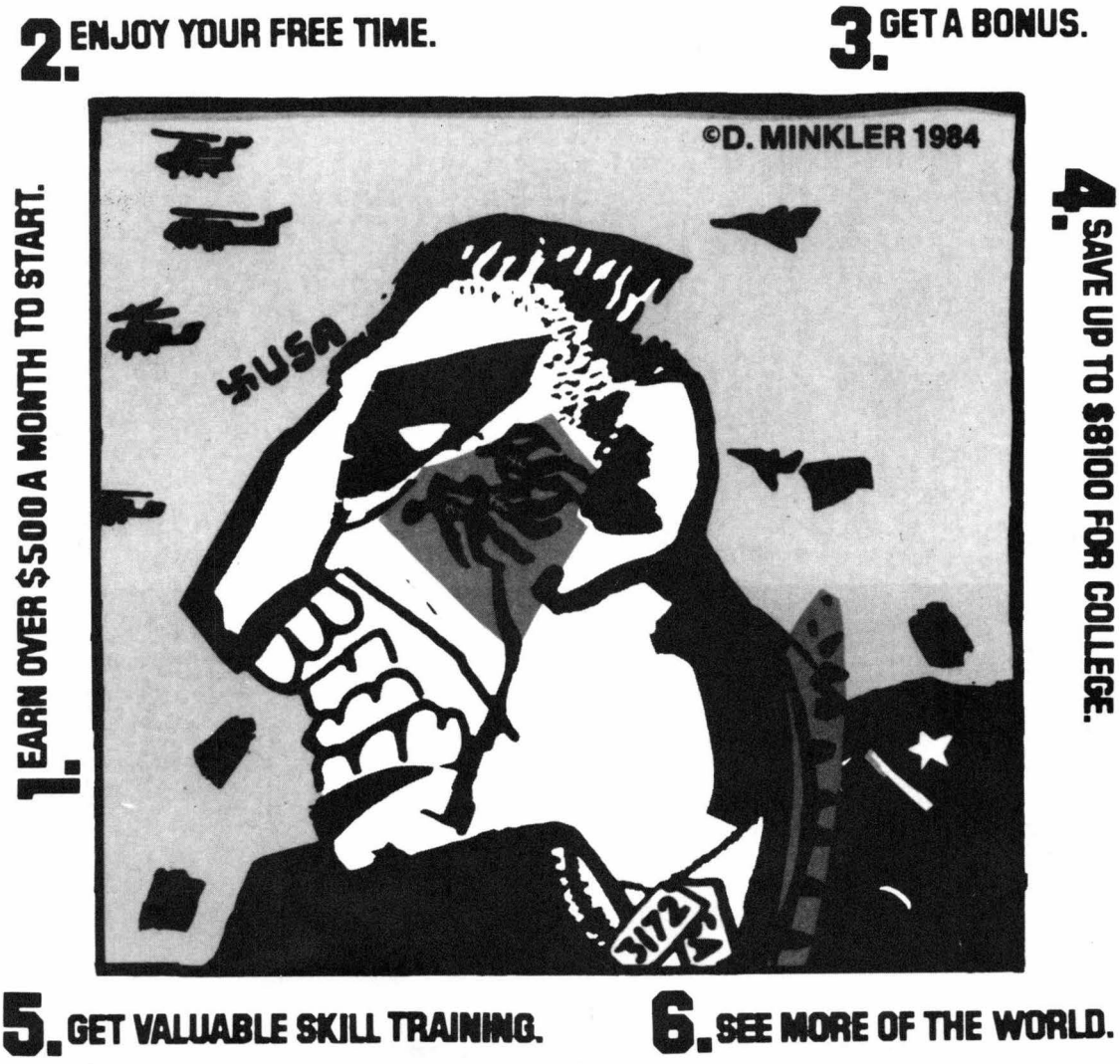
The Ampersand

Journal of the Pacific Center for Book Arts

Volume 6 Number 4 Fall 1986 P.O. Box 6209 San Francisco, CA 94101

MINKLER

INTERVIEWED OVERLEAF ☞



Frances Butler talked to Doug Minkler at his studio in Richmond, in June

FB: It seems relevant to our discussion of health hazards that you live in Richmond, which is one of the world's ten worst "cancer black spots."

DM: You can see the stacks right down my street. We just did an artists in the school program and I had the kids do a poster on the refineries. Actually it made the front page of the *West County Times*. I had them draw all the animals that supposedly live in the Bay Area.

FB: Is this the print on frosted polyester?

DM: Yes, that's the beauty of screenprint, you can put it on any surface.

FB: It looks like a positive.

DM: It would work as a photo positive too: it's real opaque. They colored them in with colored markers, it gave it a stained glass effect.

FB: They're very handsome.

DM: And the stock is very durable. They have reams of it donated to Richmond Art Center.

FB: They're wonderful. Becky's little weasel: it's heartrending.

DM: I tried to work on getting them to see that representational work is not always the most interesting and reward them for their variation, rather than—like their other teachers do—condemn them for their inaccuracy. The whole class was about trying to get them to see things differently.



FB: You also use patterning and things sticking out. How did you decide that was the most interesting?

DM: It just seems to me to allow for certain internal expressions that you can't necessarily get with real accurate realism. Depending on what's in the gut rather than the intellect. But you've got to have a merger of the two or you get too far out on the art for art's sake side and you've got to balance it out.

FB: When you have too much color and energy people don't take it seriously. Our culture goes for the neo-Platonic solids: little round shapes and squares. At a certain point you keep it in control where others go over the edge.

DM: Into the world of strict aesthetics.

FB: How do you decide what groups to work for? Do you alight like an angel?

DM: No I let them sweep down on me. Usually only non-profits mess with me. It just wouldn't be appropriate for Bank of America. A lot of them assume since they volunteer their time I'll volunteer mine. I quickly explain to them that's not the case and I lose half of them. I lose another half of those people that want me to draw a certain way. They're more interested in the representational work that I've done.

This is for a show of forty Bay Area artists that's going to Managua, Nicaragua. It's showing in Casa El Salvador before traveling. Everyone had the theme of the celebration of seven years since the Revolution.

FB: When did you start silkscreening?

DM: '79. I've been doing artwork since I was young.

FB: Do you make references or call to mind previous protest works? Is that something you expect you audience to know?

DM: The last thing I was thinking about when I did this was Picasso's "Guernica," but it all registers up here and it comes out. If you look at "Guernica," you find that he used the same symbology that the Greeks used. It's just kind of embedded in this and it comes out some time later. I would not intentionally do something I remembered had been done. If that's what comes out I don't fight it.

FB: Well, we don't have that tradition of celebrating protest in this country and I was thinking if you do that it's building up a powerful tool because there's a long history of protest graphics.

DM: Deborah was telling me I should include in my slide shows a history of that, so students can understand they are part of a historical evolution rather than just some kind of odd, once-in-a-while part of commercialism.

This is a salute to the banker. I show that to the kids, they understand it. And that helps my argument for explaining to a lot of educated liberals that the working class is very capable and is producing abstraction every day of their lives. There is a prejudice that only college-trained people have an appreciation for abstraction and working people need social realism. It's not uncommon, I find it all the time, and if you look at the work out, especially coming from the left, to see that it is social realism.

I originally had the idea that I'd produce a small edition of art prints and then a publisher would take on the job. But I soon found no one is going to touch this stuff with a ten-foot pole. I went back and became the publisher. I bought this one-armed squeegee that allows me to print six up. I've become the designer, printer and distributor which I don't like being.

FB: It takes too much time.

DM: It's phenomenally time-consuming. I've had distributors before, but I just got one in New York: Syracuse Cultural Workers. They put out a nice catalogue; there are a lot of local people in it.

I produce some prints on good quality paper and some on a thin bond which can be posted with wheatpaste. People come to me for work. A group of women who call themselves the Princesses do posting for me.

FB: I like the way you address big and little scale.

DM: This is about art and suicide.

FB: This is a great. I've never heard it so well put: "Individualism is the problem, not the solution." It's a philosophical dead end.

DM: It's such a hollow existence when you're separated from the community.

I did nine or ten years of industrial work after going to art school, so when I finally got back into the art one of the first things I wanted to do was produce a health and safety poster that people could post in their workplaces, and you wouldn't have to go through your shop steward, you wouldn't have to go to the foreman or plant manager, you'd just call



ART IS NOT A MIRROR HELD UP TO REALITY, BUT A HAMMER WITH WHICH TO SHAPE IT.

BERTOLT BRECHT

these numbers for help if you wanted it. I went to all the different health organizations. It was a huge undertaking to contact people at each one of these organizations, and they're all understaffed, didn't want to fund the thing, said that they would distribute them, but really didn't know if they had the time to sell them, and then give half the money back to me. I did all the printing—it's six colors—and they wouldn't take it on very enthusiastically because they didn't initiate it. It's like "who is this guy? We'll humor him a little but it's not our brainchild." They were understaffed and overworked and weren't in the business to market a poster, so it kind of flopped.

FB: And where this should be is in the factories and workplaces and not in an art gallery.

AJ: Are you particularly drawn to the German Expressionist era?

DM: It is exciting to me. I've read their stuff and they seem to be dealing with all the same problems we should be dealing with in this country today.

AJ: There's one unusual one down there where the colors remind me of Kokoshka.

DM. He's interesting because he represented the bourgeois perspective during the time of the Weimar Republic. He was a curator of a big museum. The workers were on strike at this factory and the police came and shot six workers. There was a fight, and one of the bullets went two blocks down and went into the museum and through a David painting. And Kokoshka came out with this seething condemnation of the strike and would they please take their fighting somewhere else so these holy heirlooms would be preserved for all time. The people on the other side of the fence, which were Herzfeld and Grosz, put out a manifesto saying the paintings in the museum should be sold to pay the families of the fallen workers.

Of all those people I was really curious to find out what they did when Hitler came in. Some of those Expressionists marched to Hitler's tune even though Hitler called them all decadents. Others left or something bad happened to them.

FB: People like Hollwein not only stayed but he did a whole series of posters that were pro-Nazi. But indeed John Heartfield is my poster hero—those collages of the thirties are the ones I really like.

DM: He and Grosz had a specific political line and they worked together and documented their feelings of what artists should be doing. They and some of the Mexican muralists who would be their close contemporaries. And Brecht is in there too.

FB: One thing that seems to be the case is that you are always trying to get powerful language as well as powerful images. Many of your posters have the quality of language that stabs.

DM: Ideally imagery would breathe life into the words and the words would reinforce the images.

These are my first attempts to begin working with a computer. They're what are called "computer-generated," I call them "computer-degenerated" art. I like to work for organizations who handle distribution, do publicity for them, so that people can see the poster, get a little education, and also have a place to go act on the problem. So the artwork isn't just an intellectual expression, it's a tool, it's got a social function. This one worked real well, they raised some money with it. The interesting thing about this computer work, especially around the theme of South Africa is this computer is the same tool that's used to set up the pass system in South Africa; it's the same computer that was used to track down Che Guevara; it's the same computer that keeps track of all of our credit, and on and on and on. So the idea, I hope, is that artists will take up that tool and put it to some beneficial uses too. I don't see a lot of inspirational stuff in this area.

FB: So far it's this very quality of the—what do they call it—"the anti-aliasing device" (I always think of it as the "aliasing device,") to get rid of the jags, the "alienated edge." It's true most of what you see is in television graphics that sell.

DM: And the artwork is usually translating somebody's illustration to a computer image that's not that exciting. At this time I'm interested in the computer, but I don't know whether it will blossom into something productive or pleasant.

FB: The anti-nuclear one is very pretty. Sorry if that seems inappropriate. Actually it's very touching in a different way. I guess it's the pleading. Are you moving into a new mode of communication?

DM: I just always experiment.