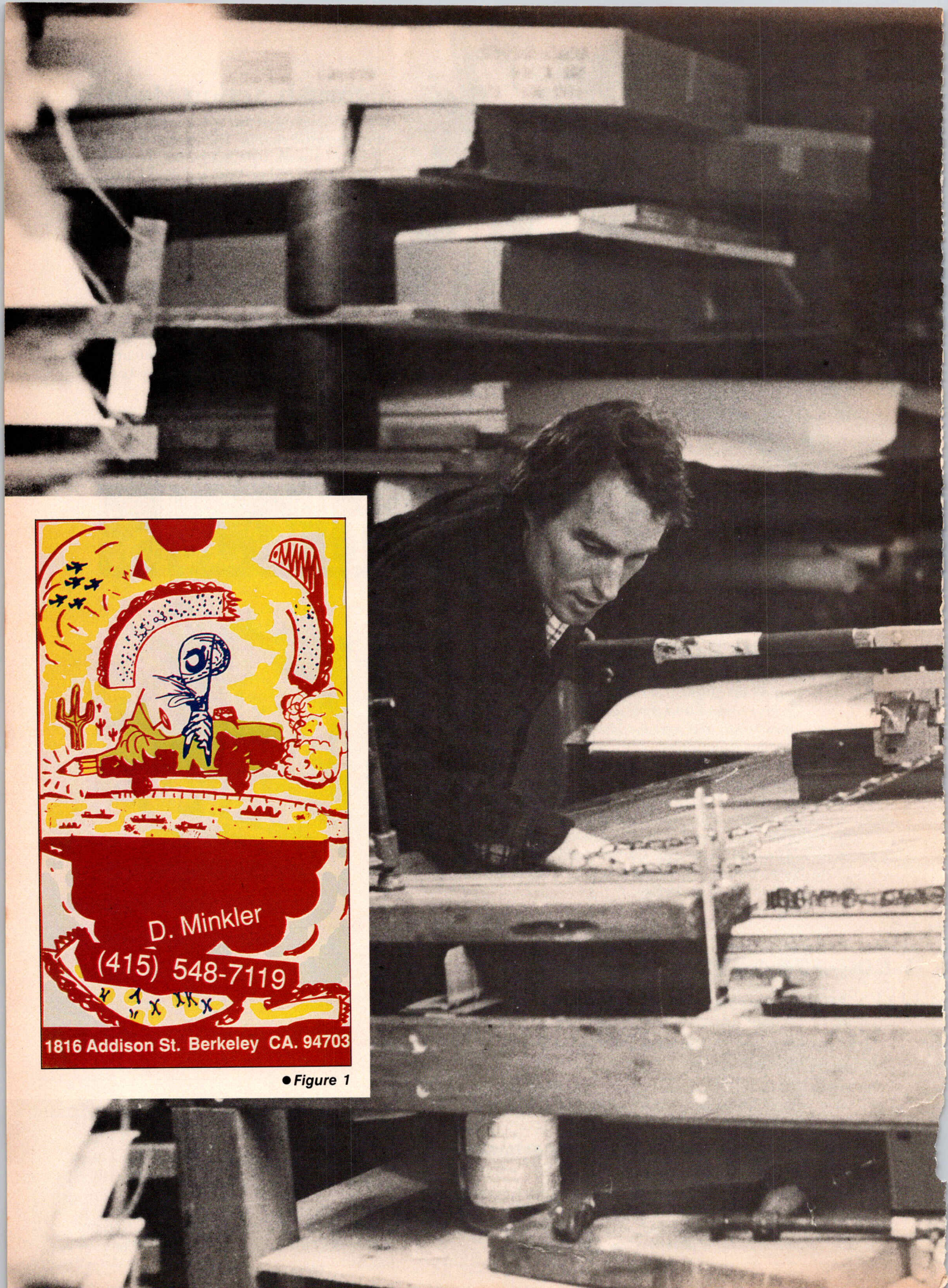
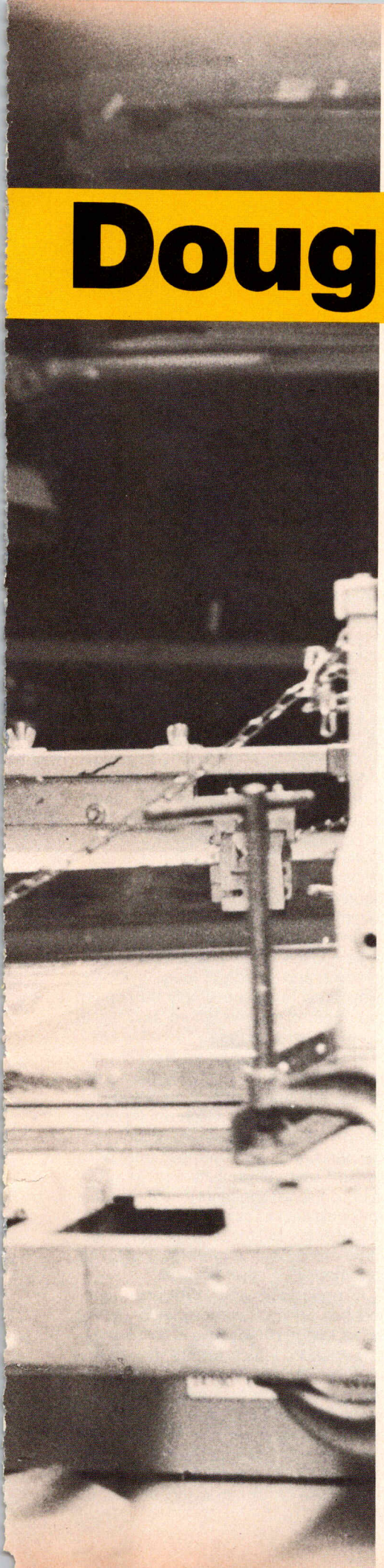



● *Figure 1*



# Doug Minkler:

## Combining Art and Ideology

**Ruthe Thompson**

Doug Minkler's business card announces his politics with all the subtlety of a bullhorn at a political rally. In a wry self-portrait of the artist as commuter, Minkler portrays himself in wild-eyed caricature, tooling over a bridge in a vehicle he calls "half road warrior, half art car" with a sharpened drawing pencil for headlights and dense clouds of exhaust spewing out the rear. "We all get our hands dirty," he remarked during an interview from the Berkeley, CA, triplex where he lives with his wife and four daughters. "I try to work only with people whose purposes I have an affinity with, but it's hard to stay untainted. I end up driving places to do my work, meet people, and get supplies. The business card pokes fun at myself for being a part of this polluter society."

In addition to the central image, the colorful screen-printed business card features a flotilla of warships and a formation of bombers hovering over a cactus field—a symbol of the use of California deserts as test grounds for military weaponry. At the bottom, the artist's name and phone number rest against the field of color offered by a red atomic mushroom cloud, while a group of X and Y chromosomes undergo mutation below (● ***Figure 1***). Clearly, Minkler chooses imagery designed to address political ideals as readily as it expresses his artistic aims.

For Minkler, in fact, the two are inextricable. Minkler has become known as a talented designer joined in a struggle against conservative programs that work to maintain the status quo. Even his choice of media reflects his political awareness. "I'm especially attracted to screen printing because of the democracy of the medium. Supplies cost a small amount and are distributed everywhere," he explained.

Noting that it would be virtually impossible for him to survive as an artist in contemporary society without operating as he does—by scavenging his materials, making all his own equipment, and working in a small unheated studio beneath his home—Minkler said, "This society has no interest in supporting the arts in any way. The only way I've been able to survive as an artist is by scavenging, by picking up what big industry throws out." Minkler procures paper, materials to make screen frames, and other supplies by rescuing discarded products from the trash bins of businesses in the East San Francisco Bay area. Not content to follow a traditional system of making a poster/making a buck, Minkler actually lives by the messages on his art.

About half of his screen prints are self-published and the remaining half are commissioned by organizations. One of the artist's favorite quotations is from German poet and dramatist Bertolt Brecht, who said "Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it." Minkler printed these words on a poster so popular he no longer has time to produce it through screen printing and has negotiated with an offset shop to have it mass produced. Commenting on the quote, Minkler said, "Art is a way I can maximize my input on making positive change. For me, it's not just philosophical, it is necessary to my survival."

Minkler's art has been hammering diligently at a variety of concerns for the past 20 years. His posters have addressed such sensitive issues as military proliferation, animal rights, feminist issues, the tobacco industry's seductive pro-smoking propaganda, the state of Palestine, apartheid, and corporate America's connection with acts of political terrorism all over the world. Unlike an elite coterie of design-




● ***Figure 2***

ers and artists who feel their art is a personal statement not improvable by the suggestions of clients or anyone else, Minkler enjoys the process of submitting designs to the commissioning organization, hearing their comments, making changes, and re-submitting until this process of negotiation and development results in approval of a final design.

His "Date Rape" poster (● ***Figure 2***), now hanging in high schools throughout Contra Costa county—"an exciting place to exhibit," Minkler remarks—resulted from such a process. Commissioned by the Prevention Program of the Contra Costa County Health and Human Services Division, the poster depicts a fractured image of a young man and woman weeping. Printed below are crisis-hotline phone numbers and the words "Want to Talk? Need help? Sex is a series of choices two people make. Rape is violence it's not just a mistake. Rape shatters, rape matters."

Placing posters about rape hotlines and counseling in area high schools appeared straightforward on the surface, but required a year and a half to complete. "There was no predecessor for the poster," Minkler said. "We were not only developing language to talk about the subject, but determining what images were appropriate. I submitted four or five pieces that came back with criticism and, in all cases, the criticism was valid. The artist does not have all the answers. Some of my designs were loaded with messages that I didn't even realize were there. Part of the excitement of this kind of work is that people are not only paying me to do an image, they are also educating me."

Another part of Minkler's learning process has been a growing comprehension that economic and social pressures can prevent his messages from being communicated at all. His work has been censored several times when he addressed issues that even progressive circles found controversial. His posters in support of the disenfranchised people of Palestine were removed from many of the local coffee houses and shops where he regularly exhibits when customers threatened to take their business elsewhere unless the artwork was removed. His designs in protest of South African apartheid (● ***Figure 3***) and the establishment of a Palestinian homeland were also removed from the windows of department stores in Oakland where he had been asked to participate in the annual "Urban Fair," a festival designed to promote ethnic diversity and urban life. In this case, however, Minkler's ideals rankled the hearts of fundamentally pro-Israel liberals.

"Apparently there is some connection between South Africa and Israel, and the stores removed both posters at the request of some patrons," Minkler said. "My position on Palestine is not popular in progressive circles, although a lot of people are coming around to the view that you can be critical of Israel's policies without being anti-Semitic. The posters were not a statement against Judaism; they were statements about political decisions made by the country's leaders. I came down hard on Vietnam and nobody accused me of being anti-Christian. But any time a country is organized around a particular religion, people tend to get a bit defensive."

Minkler's "Rooodeo" poster once again proved controversial (● ***Figure 4***). Hired by an animal-rights activist to produce posters censuring cruelty to animals at rodeo competitions, Minkler created a design so radical that his client—a personal friend—had to dissociate his organization from the image because "he told me he couldn't sit down and talk to the three-piece suits with ten-gallon hats about trying to bring some humanity to rodeos if his group had sponsored such an image," Minkler said.

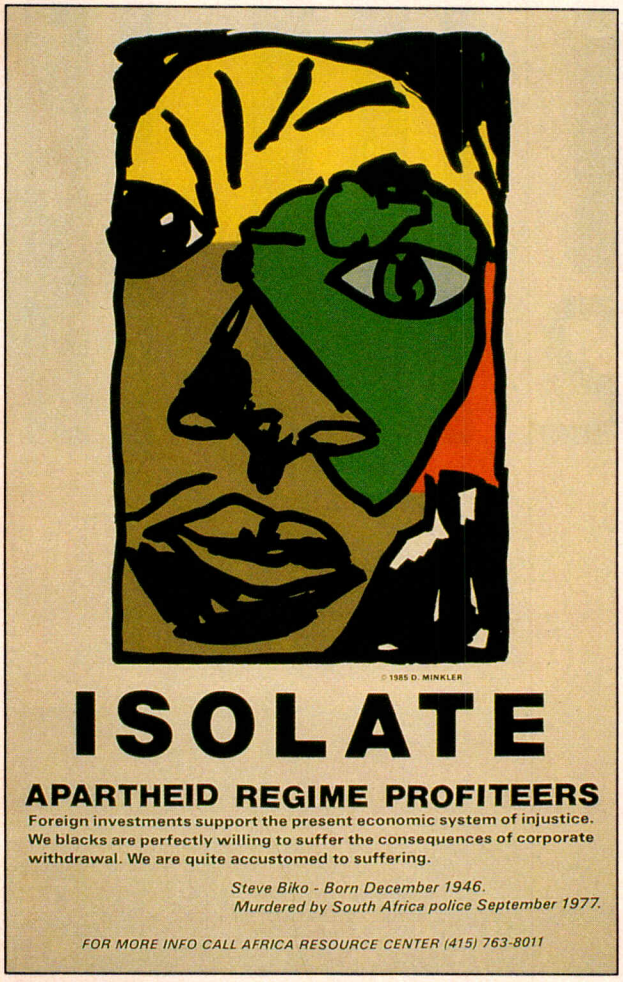
Undaunted, he produced the poster on his own and entered it in several juried competitions. "Rooodeo" won a purchase award at the 14th Harper College National Print and Drawing Exhibition in Palatine, IL, last year. "I think the artist has the responsibility to give something back to society, versus the rock-and-roll attitude of 'I'm just doing my thing,'" Minkler explained.

Although he attended three years of art school and has taught in the design department of the University of California in Davis and the prestigious California College of the Arts and Crafts in Oakland, Minkler never acquired a formal college degree. "The traditional artist's attitude is [often] elitist," he said. "Their attitude is a product of the social and educational system in this country, which reflects the interests and values of those in power. Most art schools are simply bastions of the upper class and ignore anything to do with social change.

"I reject the modern tradition of printmakers creating scarcity by destroying plates and stones or limiting production in order to bring the value up. If people like my work, I make more. I don't sign my prints and I don't number them. Why would I limit the quantity if my purpose is to popularize important ideas? I feel that my prints are just as precious as the ones in museums, but my purpose for producing them is beyond creating a precious commodity," Minkler relayed.

As good as his word, Minkler currently teaches art and screen printing at the New College of California in San Francisco's Mission district. A small, private college by virtue of its political orientation, the accredited school offers degrees in social activism. Minkler teaches in the Art and Social Change program, in which students work toward Bachelor of Arts degrees in this discipline.

Because of his reputation, he was re-




● *Figure 3*




● *Figure 4*

cently one of five artists across the country invited to submit designs for the AFL-CIO's ten-year Solidarity Day poster. In addition, he enters competitions and mounts exhibitions throughout the US: in union halls, community centers, and schools—anywhere people will have a chance to see his work. He sells posters at all these venues, as well as at fairs and directly from his studio through word of mouth. "I can't even tell you all the places I'm entered in competitions at the moment," he said. "There's no place too small to try to spread the word; in fact, the smaller the better."

Indeed, Minkler's prints are priced depending upon whether or not the purchasing institution plans to exhibit the print or simply store it in the archives. "I do the work so people will be exposed to these ideas," he said. "I charge more if it's going to be hidden away."

For the present, Minkler has as much work as he can handle. Although his editions are not limited, he usually does not reprint his works because "I'm off on another project by the time an edition sells out." His future goals reflect his current work: He just wants to keep making art designed to raise consciousness and rattle complacency. Oh, and he'd like to make a living adequate to buy medical insurance for his family and himself.

Regardless of the financial struggles he encounters as a self-employed activist, Minkler has no plans to alter his attitude or his livelihood. "I enjoy working with super-intelligent activist types not willing to follow in the ruts left by past generations," he said. Clearly, this is an artist who knows how to blaze a trail of his own. ■

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