



What Got Us Here, Won't Get Us There

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Design for Social Advocacy: Some Experiences from Taiwan

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Abstract: This study centers on three large-scale social movements that have occurred in Taiwan in recent years as case studies: (1) the Sunflower Student Movement in 2014, (2) the fundraising movement by Taiwanese people to publish an advertisement on the *New York Times* during the COVID-19 pandemic, (3) and the first successful recall of the mayor of Kaohsiung City in 2020. These three mass movements have profoundly impacted Taiwanese society, and design was involved therein. In addition to examining these movements and how design intervened in this process, this case study also interviewed designers who had participated in these social movements. The theoretical meanings of these data will be further clarified in the discussion section from the perspective of design activism. The present study provides a new perspective to examine how the design profession can be used as a practice that promotes social advocacy outside of business operations.

Keywords: Design activism; Social movement; Political design; Taiwan

1. Introduction

In 2018, The Design Museum (London) held an exhibition titled “Hope to Nope: Graphics and Politics 2008-18.” The graphic works that have inspired people in global political activities over the past 10 years were displayed, as shown in Figure 1. At the exhibition hall's entrance was a floor-to-ceiling poster with yellow letters on a red background. The giant title read: “Slogans in nice typefaces won't save the human races,” suggesting that in addition to visual beautification, design can be practiced to fulfill more critical survival goals.



Figure 1. The special exhibition *Hope to Nope: Graphics and Politics 2008-18* directly highlights: “Slogans in nice typefaces won’t save the human races.” Source: Gosling, E. (2018).

When a design faces a variety of challenging environments, design began to surpass the established professionalism since the Industrial Revolution. After disposing of the constraints of the commercial system, the scope of application and forms of design are becoming more extensive; it is increasingly challenging to define the design concept. In the book titled *Design as an Attitude*, the well-known design critic Alice Rawsthorn quoted László Moholy-Nagy’s famous words in the book titled *Vision in Motion*: “Designing is not a profession but an attitude” (Moholy-Nagy, 1947) to restore design to its original state before being tamed by the capitalist system. Rawsthorn highlighted two examples in which design is interpreted as a persuasive political protest. The first example was the student movement in May 1968 in France, where young artists and designers occupied the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and established Atelier Populaire (people’s workshops) to produce hundreds of posters, what they called ‘weapons in the service of struggle’. Another example was the Gran Fury, a group of resourceful, anonymous members. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Gran Fury designed banners, billboards, T-shirts, and stickers to stimulate awareness of AIDS and reverse people’s deep-rooted misunderstandings, as shown in Figure 2. With the popularization of digital tools and crowdfunding platforms, design has gradually transformed into a fluid, open-ended medium. This has enabled design implementation to transcend professional barriers, and the appearance of design culture has become more diversified (Rawsthorn, 2018). Regarding today’s Asian regions, which attract global attention due to the regions’ unrest, Rawsthorn’s observations on modern design are specifically embodied in Taiwan.

At the end of WWII, the Kuomintang regime retreated to Taiwan, and started to implement martial law from 1949 to 1987. The martial law period in Taiwan has lasted for 38 years, which is second only to the martial law period promulgated by the Assad regime in Syria. Since the political lifting of martial law in the 1980s, Taiwan has experienced severe social turmoil in the process of democratization and transformation. From the perspective of visual effects, social movements in Taiwan have formed a trend of inputting design in social reforms. The transition of political parties in

Taiwan, the popularization of digital tools, and the lowering of the threshold for using technology have made the presence of designers in social movements increasingly clear. From throwing eggs, and hunger strikes, to carnival-style parades, different activists with design and non-design professional backgrounds have created a variety of forms in social movements based on the needs of the movement scene. What are the environmental conditions for designers to participate in social movements? What role do the objects produced after design intervention play in social movements? How can one understand this new design practice?



Figure 2. On the left: During the French student movement in May 1968, artists and designers founded Atelier Populaire to produce banners and posters. On the right: Gran Fury designed a series of banners, billboards, T-shirts, and stickers to raise AIDS awareness. Source: Rawsthorn (2018).

Kaygan and Julier (2013) conducted a survey on designers, design scholars, and historians worldwide to understand how global design action is practiced and the challenges it faces. They found that with the change in the social economy, the forms of global design actions are more diversified and profoundly affect the development of design culture. Even though design activism continues to evolve with social unrest and is challenging to define clearly, the current trend of design actions shows that design activism is the most politically influential design method (Boehnert, 2018).

Although designers have potential political influence, their influences are rarely exposed in the current design field, or design will avoid explicit political intentions (Thorpe, 2014a). Cetin (2016) collected statistics from the research literature on design activism of the past 45 years and found that the development of design activism in each period has differed. Although the publication of relevant research has increased each year, among all the issues involved in design activism, politics has been the least discussed in any era. While the political nature of design activism is often overlooked, its importance can never be overlooked. In the face of complex and intractable issues where people are finding a way out of a predicament, democratic negotiation is often required. Design activism plays a vital role in promoting and maintaining democratic values. Hence, it is crucial to explore the active engagement of design activism in social movements and its strategic implementation of design throughout the process.

2. Methods

Fuad-Luke (2015) analyzed the operational strategies designers and social actors/stakeholders adopted at both ends of consent and dissent from the teleological orientation of design activism. These strategies can form confrontation and provocation of the status quo – ‘antagonism’, create a space for dialogue and debate – ‘agonism’, and even encourage the development of a consensus – ‘agreement’; this also explains the essential difference between design activism (upper-right quadrant) and social design (lower-left quadrant), as shown in Figure 3.

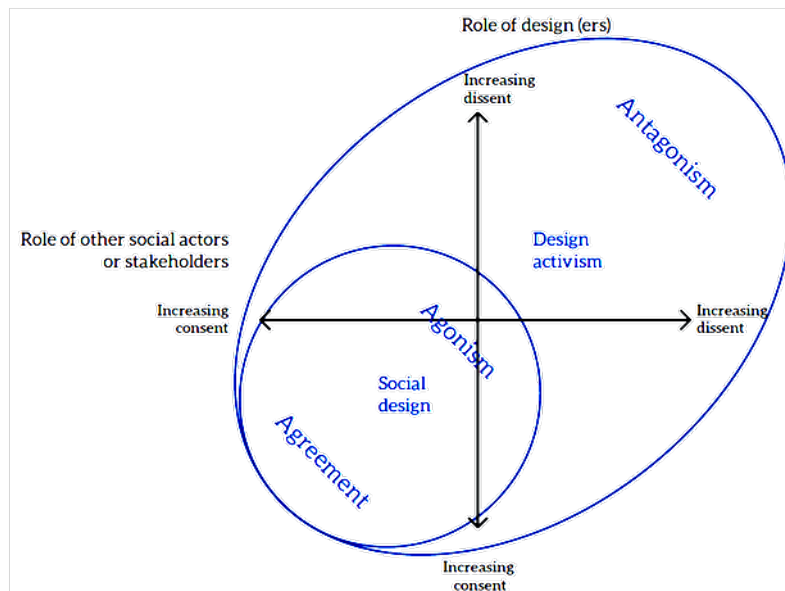


Figure 3. Depending upon the telos of their action or project, designers and other stakeholders can take consensual or dissensual roles to generate agreement, agonism, and antagonism. Source: Fuad-Luke (2015).

Based on Fuad-Luke's perspective, the present study centers on three large-scale social movements in Taiwan in recent years as case studies: (1) the Sunflower Student Movement in 2014, where protesters resisted the passing of the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA), (2) the fundraising movement by Taiwanese people to publish an advertisement on the *New York Times* during the COVID-19 pandemic, and (3) the political movement in which the first ever democratically elected mayor was recalled in Taiwan history in 2020. These three mass movements took different forms: student occupation, online crowdfunding, and voting recall, respectively. They were all large-scale mass movements rarely seen in Taiwan since lifting martial law. They have profoundly impacted society, and design was involved in all of them, which is a rare phenomenon. In addition to examining these movements and how design intervened in this process, this study also interviewed designers who have participated in social movements over long periods. The goal was to understand how design activists use design techniques in social movements to transform society and what meaning the interviewees give to their own experiences and feelings. The theoretical meanings of these data will be further clarified in the discussion section from the perspective of design activism.

3. Results

3.1 Sunflower Student Movement

The Sunflower Student Movement, *also known* the 318 Student Movement, *occurred in 2014* is considered *a* significant social movement in Taiwan *lately*. It originated on March 17th when the legislator Ching-Chung Chang announced *the completion of* the review of the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA) *at the joint meeting* and forcefully sent the CSSTA to the Legislative Yuan for reference, *disregarding* the previous negotiation between the ruling and opposition parties. *Concerned about the secretive legislative process and the potential negative impact of the CSSTA on* small- and medium-sized enterprises, *and* Taiwan's political and economic environment, *a diverse group comprising* civic organizations, students, scholars, and the public launched the "Night for Defending Democracy" on March 18, at 9:00 p.m. *Participants* broke through the police line and



Figure 4. During the 318 Student Movement, the posters, banners, and art installations were inside and around the Legislative Yuan. Source: (left) <https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/life/paper/769036>; (right) <https://www.damanwoo.com/node/78463>

occupied the Legislative Yuan. Subsequently, hundreds of people gathered for a sit-in on the roads surrounding the Legislative Yuan in solidarity with the students inside. During the occupation, soapbox speeches, civic deliberations, and artistic expressions became prevalent. The Legislative Yuan and its surroundings were adorned with posters, banners, art installations, and graffiti, as shown in Figure 4. Ordinary participants expressed their anger through doodles, while artists such as Ching-Yuan Chen and the Taiwan Mural Team created sketches, paintings, and murals within the venue. Outside the Legislative Yuan, the famous graffiti artist Candy Bird also contributed his latest work. The actions of artists were documented on the website "Artists in Legislative Yuan," established by students from the Tainan National University of the Arts (周美惠, 2014). Teachers and students from the Taipei National University of the Arts established a work area, combining different art fields. They worked overnight to make headscarves, as shown in Figure 5, and distributed to participants (邱坤良, 2014).



Figure 5. Teachers and students from the Taipei National University of the Arts produced a large-scale sunflower. They worked overnight to make headscarves for participants. Source: (left) <https://www.storm.mg/article/22685?mode=whole>; (right) <https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/politics/breakingnews/972800>

Throughout the occupation movement, the clothing worn by prominent figures, captured in photographs, became a hot topic among the younger generation. A military green jacket from the MUJI brand and a black T-shirt with the slogan "FUCK THE GOVERNMENT" often worn by Fei-Fan Lin, the general commander of the movement, were gained popularity and sold out quickly. The unexpectedly popular T-shirt was originated by the designer Wei-Chong Chen's Radical Co., Ltd. (as shown in Figure 6) earlier.



Figure 6. The movement director, Fei-Fan Lin, wearing a T-shirt printed with “FUCK THE GOVERNMENT,” and the designer, Wei-Chong Chen. Source: (left) <https://www.storm.mg/article/29432/2>; (right) <http://commagazine.twmedia.org/?p=926>

The Sunflower Student Movement of 2014 not only represented a significant social and political protest in Taiwan but also provided a platform for emerging designers and artists to express their creativity. The occupation of the Legislative Yuan and its surroundings became a symbol of resistance, with art and fashion playing a role in conveying the participants' messages and ideals.

3.2 COVID-19 – from crowdfunding to memes

In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Secretary-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, made controversial remarks accusing the Taiwanese government of tacitly condoning racial discrimination, attacks and even death threats at a press conference on April 8th. This provoked anger among the Taiwanese people due to Taiwan's successful pandemic response and assistance provided to other countries. In response, YouTubers Ray Du and Chih-Chi Chang, along with designer Yung-Chen Nieh, initiated a fundraising campaign on the zeczec platform to publish a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* through donations from the public to speak to the world.

The fundraising campaign reached its goal of NTD 4 million within nine hours and eventually raised 19 million (羊正鈺, 2020). The advertisement, designed by Yung-Chen Nieh, was published in the *New York Times* on April 14th (see Figure 7). The design featured Nieh's signature large blank style, with an upper and lower section. When the newspaper page was folded, readers could see the question "WHO can help?" in the upper left corner, followed by the answer "Taiwan" on the next half-page. This design cleverly corresponds to readers' reading habits and visual lines, effectively engaging them, and conveying the movement's true intention with the subtitle "In a time of isolation, we choose solidarity" (MikaBrea, 2020).



Figure 7. On the left: To respond to the WHO Secretary-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus' extremist remark and distorted facts about Taiwan, YouTuber Ray Du, Chih-Chi Chang, and designer Yung-Chen Nieh used a crowdfunding platform to publish an advertisement in the New York Times. (Source: <https://www.zeczec.com/projects/thisattackcomesfromtaiwan>) On the right: Designed by Yung-Chen Nieh and published as a full-page advertisement in the New York Times: WHO can help? Taiwan. (Source: Yung-Chen Nieh's Facebook post)

Due to Taiwan's limited international recognition, the advertisement design used hidden metaphors for readers to discover. Since the fundraising activity attracted much attention, it caused a wave of internet memes, as depicted in Figure 8, compiled under the hashtag '#TaiwanCanHelp spoof pictures'." These creative memes, created and shared by netizens, broke the commercial and intellectual property (IP) authorization law. This incident demonstrated the formation of new rules and norms within cyberspace social movements regarding designers, design content, and pricing.

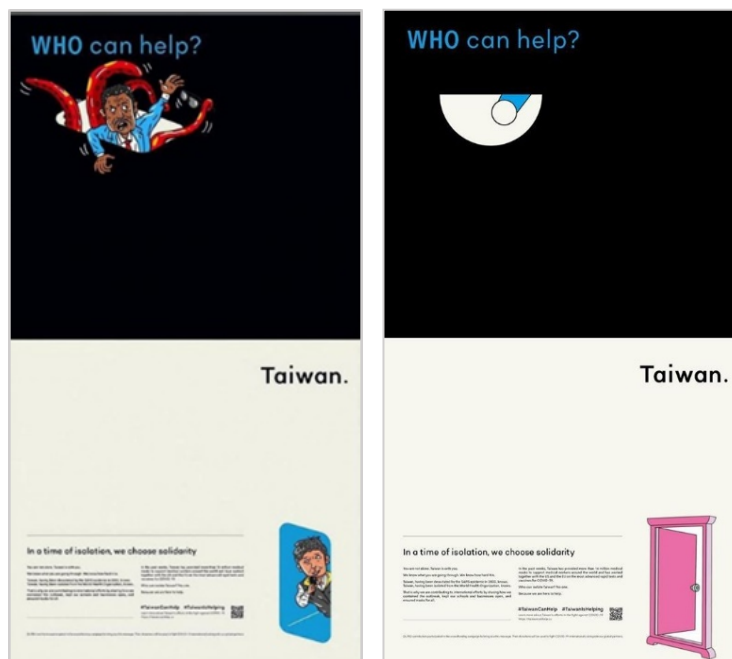


Figure 8. On the left: Tedros V.S. Chen Shih-Chung. (Source: <https://pse.is/3j888u>) On the right: Dokodemo Door version. (Source: <https://pse.is/3j888u>)

3.3 2020 Kaohsiung mayoral recall vote

In 2019, Kuo-Yu (Daniel) Han, who won the election as Mayor of Kaohsiung in 2018, broke his promise and ran for the presidential election, which caused dissatisfaction among the citizens. In 2020, after the disastrous defeat in the presidential election, groups such as WeCare Kaohsiung, Citizen Mowing Action, and Taiwan Foundation launched a recall action against Han. However, Kaohsiung City Government deliberately obstructed the recall movement from joint signature gathering to parade applications. The five action billboards hung by the recall groups were demolished one after another, and the groups replaced them with large-scale projection advertisements (程啟峰, 2020), as shown in Figure 9. After the Public Works Bureau discovered this, it hurriedly searched for the law but failed to find any law against projection advertisements. The projected advertisement not only made the city government unable to demolish it, but the innovative countermeasures against the municipal government's crackdown was repeatedly reported by the media, which amplified the recall's publicity effect unexpectedly. The recall groups also made a template engraved with "666 Vote for Recall," and they sprayed the words "666 Vote for Recall" on the sidewalk in front of the Municipal Government's Siwei Administrative Center on the dirty ground with a high-pressure water gun, as shown in Figure 10. Not only was washing the floor not illegal, but it also did not destroy public property; even the mayor could see it when going to work (葛祐豪, 2020).



Figure 9.(left) After the billboards of recall action were removed, they were replaced with projected advertisements.

Source: Central News Agency <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/aip/202005070129.aspx>

Figure 10.(right) The recall action groups washed the floor to spray "666 Vote for Recall." Source: Central News Agency

<https://www.cna.com.tw/news/aip/202005090020.aspx>

The recall vote was held on June 6, 2020. The voting result indicated that 939,090 votes agreed to the recall. The recall successfully dismissed Daniel Han Kuo-Yu, who became the first mayor recalled in the history of the Republic of China (Taiwan).

4. Discussion: theoretical reflections on the previous experiences

4.1 Objects of protest become aesthetic symbols in everyday life

According to interviews with experienced participants and designers, design plays an increasingly important role in contemporary social movements, particularly among the younger generation; "Good design will even contribute to fundraising." Another designer also observed that social movements are increasingly seeking professional designers to contribute to their causes, either by

taking up specific cases or offering voluntary assistance. This trend highlights the growing importance of design activists in addressing social issues and signifies a greater emphasis on aesthetic expression by social movement organizations.

On the other hand, participants in social movements express their political identity and cultural preferences through the consumption of political commodities. Design objects that address social issues have become daily necessities and a means of personal expression. One interviewee said: "politically-themed T-shirts can be worn beyond specific movement contexts and serve as a medium for self-expression."

Featherstone (2007) proposed the concept of the "aestheticization of everyday life," where daily life is transformed into artistic expressions. This trend is reflected in the use of symbols and images in contemporary society and has permeated social activism, extending from specific movement occasions to everyday life. Purchasing, participating, and using or wearing politically-themed products have become ways to convey personal political ideas and display individual tastes.

Overall, design activism is increasingly integrated into social movements, allowing for aesthetic expression and personal political engagement in both specific contexts and everyday life. (see Figure 11)



Figure 11. The concept of the "aestheticization of everyday life" has facilitated the integration of design into social activism, while also making political engagement a part of everyday life. On the left: Yellow ribbon for recall movement. (Source: <https://www.gvm.com.tw/article/73085>) On the right: Anti-nuclear flag decorations inside the café. (Source: <https://reurl.cc/XV30YD>)

4.2 The Impact of design objects—non-human actors connecting social networks

Cultural artefacts in social movements may have a long-lasting effect on individuals' beliefs and practices, organizations, and even larger cultures (Van Dyke & Taylor, 2019). The campaign team organizes prize-giving activities to recall Mayor Han, providing participants with honorable gifts also share the same meaning. Through the submission of joint recall signatures, the public can obtain small plaques, serving as an incentive for public participation. The occurrence of a movement relies on the active involvement of supporters and the creation of a virtual network facilitated by object design, which mobilizes people. Success in social movements is a result of the combined efforts of individuals and objects. Similarly, a designer who played a role in promoting Taiwan's international identity stated, "At the end, the Taiwanese passport (sticker) was printed in 430,000 copies... A significant number of countries distributed the sticker through a movement network."

The impact of manufactured objects on society can be examined using ANT theory (actor-network theory) in the field of science, technology, and society (STS). ANT theory proposes that people, objects, and systems within social networks possess agency, influencing interactive situational networks. Objects, as active participants in action networks, can initiate various forms of engagement, including permission, encouragement, recommendation, influence, and prohibition.

During the interaction process, people and objects jointly configure each other and construct the appearance of the whole material world (Boradkar, 2010).

Social movement organizations encounter challenges when addressing local social issues due to power imbalances. Nonetheless, design has emerged as a crucial resource in sustaining long-term resistance and maintaining public appeal. The output of the design profession plays a significant role in the movement process, forming chains of idea transmission that connect actors within an expanded network, transcending temporal and spatial constraints.

4.3 Redefining design activism—from social design to design society

According to Fuad-Luke (2009), Design Activism refers to the application of design thinking, imagination, and practice to create a counter-narrative that aims to generate positive social, institutional, environmental, and economic change. Thorpe further adds that design activism is more than resistance; it involves generative creation and uses disruptions to intervene in the status quo. Design seeks to achieve reformative change or transformative innovation, striking a balance between the two (Thorpe, 2014a). This study examines cases that exemplify reformative change and transformative innovation as strategic orientations of design activism.

Moreover, the cases above illustrates how designers are good at “diagnosing” problems and proposing solutions to social reforms (Thorpe, 2014b). Design activism offers designers the freedom to challenge power structures and create alternative solutions by reimagining products, services, and experiences (Fuad-Luke, 2015). It uncovers hidden power structures and acts as a form of social movement, bringing issues into the public sphere. Some related studies even regard design action as a “design movement” (Julier, 2013) or a “social movement” (Cetin, 2016).

Design activists empower individuals and causes by offering tools, strategic thinking, and communication systems (Ilyin, 2021). Design objects play a vital role in visualizing and disseminating social issues, acting as a voice. By creating objects, designers draw attention to underrepresented phenomena and drive social innovation. They challenge power dynamics and establish an “agonistic space” for societal transformation (Disalvo, 2010).

5. Conclusion

This study investigated three large-scale social movement cases involving design intervention in Taiwan in recent years – the anti-Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement, the fundraising campaign to publish an advertisement to clarify the controversy surrounding the COVID-19 issue, and the recall of the Mayor of Kaohsiung. These movements adopted different forms and appeals. Thus, they resulted in various design strategies and operational forms, including banners, art installations, T-shirts of iconic characters for the Sunflower Student Movement, and the fundraising advertisement design published in the *New York Times*. In the digital age, spoof and Internet memes continuously forwarded through IP authorization have even expanded the field of implementation and operation methods of social movements. Each of these three cases in the study demonstrated political intentions at the local, national, and global levels, respectively, and provided designers with alternative platforms to showcase their creativity and explore more diverse design concepts. In problem-solving, design involves aesthetics and political, economic, social, and cultural challenges. Designers must constantly adjust and revise their strategies in provocation/collaboration, destruction/innovation, confrontation/compromise, and facilitating consensus/addressing dissensus.

Design activism as a critical practice appears in social participation, political activism, or civil disobedience. Design activism shapes material culture effectively, advocates social values and changes human behaviors (Rezai & Erlhoff, 2021). Fuad-Luke (2009) said, “We need [aesthetics] that

encourages new ideas, values, and new ideals of true human prosperity, to transcend the narrow idea regarding economic growth as progress.” Moreover, designers have been described as “material-semiotic storytellers” whose material practices normalize past and present values into the future (Prendeville, Syperek & Santamaria, 2022). Designers can serve as agents of resistance by transforming themselves from “cultural intermediaries” who create symbolic meanings (Bourdieu, 1984) to design activists who utilize culture to embody their visions for a better world.

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