

IF NOT WITH ART THEN WITH A PUMPGUN

A talk with Marc Rudin
about his works as a revo-
lutionary graphic designer,
revolutionary aesthetics
and their meaning.

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Marc Rudin was part of the Palestinian liberation struggle for years. His political posters were published under the logo of the PFLP, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. We met him and talked about his work, his revolutionary aesthetics and their meaning.

How come you created posters for the revolutionary movement?

My politicization began at the vocational school, during my apprenticeship as a graphic designer. After that, it was May 1968 that had a strong influence on me. At that time, the development of visual forms, the many posters, etc. was especially important to me. At that time we often worked together in poster collectives. We made posters about everything that stressed us or was important for us.

What was specific in terms of design at this time?

At that time we developed a completely new creative language, namely a total reduction. In 1969 I started making posters in this style. I combined this pictorial language with various techniques that I had learned in the teachings for graphic design. We mostly worked with screen printing. For this we painted the negative with latex directly on the screen. We also produced stencils, even in large formats, about 1 to 1.5 meters. With stencils you have to reduce and simplify the main part due to the technology.

Why did you choose this reduced imagery?

This makes the message much more direct and can therefore be read much better by the viewer than other styles with many details. Today SVP has taken over our pictorial language of that time. Although with horrible content, but the way they have adapted the imagery has been very skillful.

How did you come to join the Palestinian resistance?

In the mid-1970s, while working on large murals on occupied buildings in Milan, I met members of the PFLP, who invited me to Lebanon. Soon I had major problems with the justice system in Switzerland, so I fled to Lebanon, where I was welcomed with open arms. I immediately started to make myself useful and to provide my skills.

What was your working day in Beirut like?

In Beirut three artists already worked as poster designers for the PFLP. They were two Palestinians and one Iraqi. We formed a collective. It was important to me, not just to make art, but applied art or crafts. One does not get lost so much and people can actually do something with it. Many wanted to do Western-style art with exhibitions and all the spectacle, but that did not interest me. At that time, we had hardly any problems with our political work in Lebanon. There was little censorship. That changed when the Israeli invasion of Lebanon was prepared. With orders for my work, I had a lot of freedom. Usually my first plot was accepted and I could print the poster. I did not have to do any other work and could concentrate fully on the creative work.

How did you go about working on a new poster?

Most of the time, I had no or only a few requirements, which was partly difficult. Often I did not even have a text by which I could orient myself. I just knew the occasion for which I designed the poster, for example, May 1, March 8, etc. Such recurring occasions were a challenge to always come up with something new. First, I made several small sketches on a large sheet of paper. Because I think that a good poster can also be used as a stamp, as a simplification and reduction of the message. These sketches I worked on with pencil or pen. Sometimes I drew up to 40 different sketches, of which I then chose 2 or 3. Next, I made a larger and more

detailed sketch to half the size of the final poster. For this I then got the opinion of others and those responsible, but sometimes I did not do that, if I considered my design very convincing. Then I still had to put the slogan on the poster. It was often not known to me at the beginning of my work. Usually the text was written in two languages, for example in Arabic and English or Arabic and French, Russian or Spanish. The posters were almost always in two languages because they were eventually distributed around the world. Finally, the poster was printed using the offset printing process, with approximately 5,000 copies. I was there when the printing was done, in that way I could follow the whole process.

What are typical symbols that you used on your posters?

For example, there is the prickly pears cactus. Its Arabic name means as much as the one who is patient. It survives under hostile conditions, needs little water and has spikes. As symbols for Palestine, I've always included orange or olive branches in my posters. I also used the map of the original Palestine again and again. Of course, in this list, the Al Aqsa Mosque or the Dome of the Rock with its golden dome should not be missing. The Kalashnikov with its characteristic features served as symbol for the liberation struggles of the Third World.

Were there formative experiences that have strongly influenced your artistic development?

As you can see in many of my posters, the Intifada, the so-called rebellion of the stones, exerted a great influence on my creative work.

We have often been confronted with criticism and anti-Semitism allegations regarding the Kufiya or our solidarity with the PFLP ...

Why should the PFLP be an anti-Semitic organization? The PFLP is a secular organization. It was always clear to us that we were not criticizing Judaism but Zionism as a colonialist movement. That's still the case. We were always aware of this difference. Zionism emerged at the end of the 19th century when all European states had colonies. Herzl came up with the idea of „a land without people for a people without land“. That was and is a very reactionary ideology. Today, Zionism is one of the last open colonialisms openly engaged in land grabbing. The comparisons that Zionism equals Nazism I think is wrong, because that's not true. But it must be clearly recognized that Zionism is a colonialist ideology comparable to French, British or Dutch colonialism in Africa or Australia. Colonialisation was mainly done with disadvantaged people or people who were exposed to pogroms, which makes it all the more tragic. Also in the colonization of Algeria, France pursued a similar strategy. The same was in South Africa, where many religiously persecuted minorities were settled. The same pattern can be observed in the colonization of America.

Have these anti-Semitism allegations already existed earlier?

In the third world, these reproaches did not exist, but when I came back to Europe, I sometimes felt those strongly. That was in the late 90s. Here in Zurich I occasionally had to face heavy criticism. Basically, there are different forms of antisemitism. There is anti-Semitism of the generation of the perpetrators. They do not live anymore, but in the 90s they still existed. They detested everything Jewish, that is

anti-Semitism in its crudest form. Then there is anti-Semitism, as found in France and Switzerland. They may not like the Jews, but they should go to Israel and make themselves useful by cleaning up with the filthy Arabs. My father was such a typical Swiss anti-Semite. He liked to tell Jewish jokes, but then he was one of the first people to visit Israel on a church trip and admire how they are revolutionizing everything there.

How important was art in the revolutionary struggle at that time?

The importance of art as a revolutionary expression was not often recognized and granted at the time. I often was in a difficult position. Some of my Arab comrades would rather have made art for art's sake. Many thought that they had to prove that Palestinians could make art as well. Also, in the Arab world for a long time there was no representation of human forms in art.

Did one of your posters for the PFLP especially remain in your memory?

That's a tough question, because I designed about 200 posters for the PFLP. Maybe the poster for the massacre of Sabra and Shatila with the bound hands and the pool of blood.

Would you like to add anything else?

What is important to me in relation to my design work: Already during my training I oriented myself to realism. I want to emphasize the difference between realism and naturalism. Naturalism is the idealization of nature. Realism conveys heightened sensations, so that a message gets to the viewer. A representative of naturalism is, for example, Albert Anker, whose style I find boring. No wonder Blocher is a fan of his. A representative of the realism is, for example, Gustave Courbet (picture: quarry). An important person of French painting. The influences of realism have always guided me in my work. It is no shame to design your work in such a way that even people with little education can read the message and understand it. The work of many modern artists during the 1960s, such as Mark Rothko or Action Painting, had nothing revolutionary for me. I found them boring.



MARC RUDIN JIHAD MANSOUR

Marc Rudin was born in 1945 in Bern. During his training as a graphic designer, he began to get engaged politically. Especially May 68 was important for his political development. During this time, he began to make posters for the revolutionary movement and he participated in various political actions and squats. He spent several years in Paris, where he continued to be politically active and became a member of a Palestinian Solidarity Committee. Finally, he returned to Switzerland, where he worked in Biel at General Motors on the assembly line. Together with other workers they agitated in the factory. They organized strikes and printed newspapers. Furthermore, Marc was active as a revolutionary graphic artist, and often stayed abroad.

In 1979, he left Switzerland to escape from the access of the Swiss judiciary and from a conviction for a militant action. Through France, Algeria and Syria, he traveled to Lebanon, where he became part of the Palestinian resistance. Here he got the name Jihad Mansour. In 1982, he witnessed alongside his comrades the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the siege of Beirut. The PFLP fighters engaged in resistance to the invasion for months until the PFLP headquarters was relocated to Syria. This is how Marc Rudin's time in Damascus began, where he continued his work as a revolutionary poster designer for about nine years with some interruptions. At the end of 1991, he was arrested at the Turkish border and extradited to Denmark, where in 1993 he was convicted for his involvement in the militant anti-imperialist struggle. He spent several years as a prisoner of imperialism, until he was finally deported to Switzerland in 1997. As Jihad Mansour he made a contribution in the fight for the revolution in the Third World and as Marc Rudin he became part of our history of internationalist, anti-imperialist and revolutionary struggle here in the cities. To this day, he has remained faithful to his and our history of resistance.