The San Francisco Oracle
By Sally Zimmerman
How the San Francisco Oracle Came to be

BY SALLY ZIMMERMAN

The 1960s in America were a time for radical change and numerous uprisings that sprung out of movements taking place all over the country. "Social movements" as Bob Ostertag calls them in his book "People’s Movements, People’s Press," sought to "promote ideas, not profits" (Ostertag, 2006, p. 3). The underground and alternative press played a huge role in assisting these social movements as they gained more and more support for their radical and vastly different way of thinking. The mainstream press just simply was not getting the job done when it came to the coverage of events and people that society wanted to know the truth on. So, they turned to the underground and alternative press for the whole truth, not getting the job done when it came to the coverage of events and people that society wanted to know the truth on. Allen Cohen, the editor of the San Francisco Oracle during its most lively period, stated in his editor notes in the facsimile edition of the newspaper that there was a "deeper revolution" that was "being nurtured in the Haight based on the visionary and mind-expanding experiences with LSD, the cooperative living environment and the exuberance of youth. These poets and artists envisioned a revolution of love and peace starting in the Haight and engulfing the whole planet" (Cohen, 1991, p. xxvii). This seemed to be satisfying to the staff of the San Francisco Oracle, as Cohen also said, "It wasn't difficult in 1966 to work occasionally, sell marijuana or LSD intermittently, and thereby earn a living for oneself and friends" (Cohen, 1991, p. xxxiii). This was a time when LSD, marijuana and really any other type of drug you can think of were being used in large quantities and were thought to alter people’s minds in a positive manner. 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These papers usu-
Oracle Stresses Importance of Color

This wasn’t something that was limited to the front page. The Oracle used color throughout the entirety of its papers. They believed that the media was the message and therefore, the illustrations and graphics done by their staffers were basically the “news” that the San Francisco Oracle was displaying in its newspapers. The Oracle was part of the “death to the author” movement. Whereas a mainstream paper has the goal of delivering the news and accompanying images, the San Francisco Oracle wanted to deliver graphics and illustrations with accompanying text.

When discussing the aesthetics of the Oracle, Cohen said, “To achieve the oracular effects we wanted we would give the text, whether prose or poetry, to artists and ask them to design a page for it, not merely to illustrate it, but to make an organic unity of the word and the image. Most of the artists would conceive and manifest their designs in a state of expanded awareness” (Cohen, 1991, p. xxxiii). Simply put, the illustrations were more important than the text in the San Francisco Oracle. Throughout the pages, small doodles filled space or were drawn into the margins.

“The media is the message.”

An Abundance of Doodles

“Wings, rays, auras, arabesques, swirls, unicorns, and centaurs, mandalas, collages, flying saucers and their inhabitants, op-art, flowers and paisley, nudes, feathers, and ghosted images were interwoven into a dazzling cross-cultural spectacle of multidimensional depth, pattern and flow” (Cohen, 1991, p. xxxiii)
After the “aesthetic redirection” by new art director Gabe Katz, the *San Francisco Oracle* began its plunge into vibrant spreads and full pages devoted to spirituality. Gary Snyder wrote the centerfold of the third *Oracle*, entitled “Buddhism and the Coming Revolution.” In the article, Snyder criticizes Buddhism for its lack of “analysis of how suffering and ignorance are caused by social factors” (Cohen, 1991, p. xxix). The collage surrounding the article seems hectic and cluttered, with a few nonsense images thrown in, so as to say the Buddhism that is being written about is nonsensical. The points of this article are reiterated in another article from the fourth *Oracle*, titled “Yogi and the Commissar.” This article detailed one *Oracle* artist, Allan Williams, and the beating he endured from the police for violating curfew. Williams talked about how he used his training in yoga and his spirituality to withstand the pain he was enduring. This article shows how the staffers of the *Oracle* had a firm belief in the suffering and ignorance caused by social factors mentioned in the Buddhism article. These two separate articles demonstrate how the *San Francisco Oracle* revolved around strong spiritual beliefs and the power these people believed these things had over them.

**Spirituality in the Oracle**

**Oracle #5 A Turning Point**

The fifth edition of the *San Francisco Oracle*, called the “Human Be-In Issue” established “the basic format that the paper was to develop for the next seven issues” (Cohen, 1991, p. xxxiii). This issue is when shaped columns (instead of straight columns) become the norm. Cohen stated, “from here on all resemblances to an ordinary newspaper were purely coincidental” (Cohen, 1991, p. xxxiii).
Spirituality & Drugs

Dr. Mota’s Medicine Show Bus

In the sixth issue of the Oracle, an illustration by John Phillips called “Dr. Mota’s Medicine Show Bus” appears. The drawing is supposed to resemble an old, broken down bus and has signs all over it saying “Cannabis Cure All,” “Mushroom Magic,” “Cactus Therapy,” “Peyote Practice,” “Dope Inc.” and more. This medicine show bus was a portrayal of the Oracle’s attitude toward drugs and how they saw them as “medicines for the sick spirit of western civilization that was suffering from the disease of alienation, and the domination and destruction of nature” (Cohen, 1991, p. xxxix). The Oracle revolved a good amount of their illustrations and graphics around drugs, as they truly believed these were the gateway to being “cured” of societal pressures and the only way to achieve peace. This particular illustration is very telling of how openly and lovingly the people of Haight-Ashbury proclaimed their beliefs in the healing powers of drugs.

Downfall

The Oracle’s Expiration Date

The last issue of the paper, “Symposium 2000 AD & the Fall,” ran in February 1968. In all, twelve issues of the paper were released over a span of seventeen months. Both the cover of this issue and the “Tree of Death” illustration were said to be symbolic of the “fragility and exhaustion of the vision” (Cohen, 1991, p. lii). Cohen writes about how the counterculture had been under attack from both local and national authorities for quite some time by that point. Besides this, a number of other factors played into the demise of the San Francisco Oracle. The mayor of San Francisco at the time, Joseph Alioto, “hated the Hippies” (Cohen, 1991, p. lii) as it was rumored he was being withheld from the vice presidency of the Democratic Party because he was being scrutinized for losing control of his city. Because of this, he increased security and police forces in the area, which didn’t sit well with the counterculture movement. The Black Panthers were also credited in the downfall of the San Francisco Oracle and the peace and love revolution as a whole. Cohen writes that the Black Panthers “had made self-defense the priority for revolution instead of non-violence” (Cohen, 1991, p. lii). Because of this, more people in the area started carrying guns. This coincided with increased violence in the streets because of hard drugs. The originators of the paper also felt they needed rejuvenation, and left San Francisco to find it. When they returned, Cohen says most of them “felt it was time to act out what we had already dreamed” (Cohen, 1991, p. lii). These numerous reasons for the paper’s downfall show how the social and political events of the time really took their toll on the Oracle. They tried so hard to create a paper that had nothing to do with current events or actual news. Ironically, I believe that if the Oracle had been more in-tune with what was going on in San Francisco and the U.S. at the time, they could have maybe created a strategy to keep the paper in existence.
The ultimate goal of the San Francisco Oracle was to start a revolution for peace and love in the world. While their intentions may have been true, the execution of this goal was far off mark. The overall immaturity of the newspaper was partly responsible for its end. In “Slouching Toward Bethlehem,” Joan Didion claimed that there were really no activists in San Francisco in the 1960s. In San Francisco, Didion claimed that something important was occurring. “We were seeing the desperate attempt of a handful of pathetically unequipped children to create a community in a social vacuum. Once we had seen these children, we could no longer overlook the vacuum, no longer pretend that the society’s atomization could be reversed” (Didion, 1990, p. 122). I want to emphasize the word children, because that is truly who was involved in the counterculture of San Francisco at the time. Didion says these children are “less in rebellion against the society than ignorant of it” (Didion, 1990, p. 123). Whereas the staff of the San Francisco Oracle (and the rest of this counterculture movement) was attempting to start a revolution centered on peace, love and drugs, what they were actually doing was isolating themselves from the rest of society, i.e. putting themselves in a “social vacuum.” In this sense, they could not be reasoned with and they sought to rebel solely for the sake of rebelling. In the facsimile edition of the newspaper, J.M. Jamil Brownson states that he viewed the Oracle “as representing a narrow range of the rainbow spectrum in which it was so colorfully printed. The Oracle failed to create a rainbow coalition from a chorus of voices across the oppositional spectrum.”

What did the San Francisco Oracle leave behind? In “A Gradual Awakening” by Stephen Levine, it is stated that this publication “will be remembered for its extraordinary graphic design” and “groundbreaking printing techniques.” In essence, the images and illustrations from the paper are mesmerizing, but the after-effect of the paper doesn’t go much deeper than that. There is not much political significance in the paper, and Cohen even says, “Some writers have seen an escapist gap between the Oracle’s point of view and the anti-war movement” (Cohen, 1991, p. xxxiv). The staff of the paper was focused almost exclusively on the design of the paper to have it be unique from other papers of the time. In doing so, they neglected the actual substance of the paper and put themselves at a disadvantage for becoming a well-known (and well-remembered) alternative paper.

**Conclusion**

**Sources**

