



**GLEN E FRIEDMAN**  
INTERVIEW BY SHEPARD FAIREY / PORTRAIT BY VIDA DOMINGUEZ



GLEN E FRIEDMAN IS hardcore. HE IS SKATEBOARDING. HE IS PUNK. HE IS HIP-HOP. HE IS POLITICAL. HE IS AN ACTIVIST, AN INSPIRATION. AFTER 30 YEARS CAPTURING PICTURES OF COUNTLESS ICONS AND PHENOMENA, FROM THE BEASTIE BOYS TO PRISTINE CLOUDSCAPES, GLEN HAS METHODICALLY UNCLOGGED THE ART WORLD'S AGING PLUMBING IN SEARCH OF AESTHETIC TRUTH.

*He unleashed the staple of youth culture now so entrenched in American, and even global, history that it's difficult to imagine a social landscape without the coinciding influences of skateboarding, punk, and hip-hop.*

*Longtime friend Shepard Fairey learned how Friedman has realigned the very aesthetic in which our modern day photography and culture is based. Through his visually arresting and painstakingly composed photos, Friedman begs the viewer to ask of themselves, "What the fuck have you done?" —Katie Zuppann*

*Shepard Fairey: I think that there are a lot of aspects of your career, from every stage of it, that are really interesting. It could be a five-hour conversation. What got you into photography*

*in the first place? Because you didn't get into it because you had an ambition to be a photojournalist or an art photographer, it was because you got hurt, right?*

*Glen E Friedman: That was one of the things. I think the ways other artists get into their art form is how I got into mine. Whatever parts of art they're into or whatever mediums they practice, I usually respect those that got into it for the same way I did, because they felt like it was something they had to do. They had a personal responsibility to share in a particular way their visions, thoughts, feelings, express themselves in a public way that would help people deal with their own lives in a different way, or to inspire people. Besides being a skateboarder myself, the truth is when I broke*

*my arm in the fall of 1976 I realized I would probably start taking more pictures than spending time actually skating. But skating was a big inspiration to me and really changed my life in a lot of ways. I thought things going on around me weren't portrayed in the magazines the way I thought they should be portrayed or the way I was seeing it.*

*I was hanging around with these guys who were taking skateboarding to the next level and doing things in a way that no one else had. So it's like a personal responsibility: I'm going to do this, I'm going to portray this because I feel as though I can. I was always involved in these cultures that were inspiring me. Any good artist is inspired by something and has something they are trying to express within them to other*





Bobby Pearsey at the Playboy Club Hotel  
Great Gorge, New Jersey  
1977  
(From *Fuck You Too*)



Tony Alva at the Dog Bowl  
1977  
(From *Fuck You Heroes*)



people, not for commercial gain unless they're a commercial artist, but a true artist, because it's something emotional, philosophical within themselves that they are trying to get out. And that's what I do, that's all I can do to this day.

We can talk about the transition from skateboarding to punk and hardcore and onto hip-hop; there was a fluid evolution that you were following and were helping guide. It's apparent even in your early photographs that you were very intentionally composing your photos in an aesthetically flattering way. Was that something you were completely aware of or something that came naturally?

I think it's a little bit of all those things. It kind of came naturally. It was sometimes intentional,

sometimes you just wanted to get the action and concentrate on it. But I grew up very artistically inclined. I knew that it had to be more than just a snapshot. I had to do something that no one else could do, something to separate myself in a way. Otherwise, why am I speaking to you if someone else could say what I'm speaking, whether it's with my voice or with my artwork?

I thought you had to take it to the next level. Not every picture displays that, but it was always a goal. In those perfect moments when that goal would come together with the action, intensity, with the character, composition, you have the perfect pictures. And certainly plenty of pictures were published that weren't perfect, but you're always striving for the perfect ones. A lot of

those ended up in my book, *The Idealist*. It's political but it's more about an aesthetic, too.

I was going to ask you about that. It seems that you're an idealist but it's multi-layered in that it's an aesthetic idealism and a social idealism. I mean your first book, *Fuck You Heroes*, is about these really rebellious subcultures. Explain your involvement in all those things.

I know a lot of people didn't recognize all of those cultures and their connection until *Fuck You Heroes* came out, or they grew up with those cultures already in their lives. In my life, none of those things were coexisting initially. You know when I started skateboarding there wasn't any hip-hop, per se. When we got into

punk rock, or when it really started to catch on in America, there was no such thing as punk rock. Skateboarding, of course growing up in Southern California, was something that people just did. Then eventually this music came about that we started hearing that was loud and aggressive, just like the skating we were doing. All of a sudden I'm not being inspired just by skateboarding, I'm being inspired by music like I never was before. And I'm thinking, "This stuff is so fucking important to my life; it's like giving me new blood. To me, it's like, holy fuck! Nobody else even knows about this, but I know, I better do whatever the fuck I can to let them know about it."

These are rebellious youth cultures that are all intertwined because of their attitude. They're

all punk rock. Skateboarding is punk rock and punk rock is skateboarding and hip-hop is punk rock and skateboarding is hip-hop. It's radical youth culture and you had to do it on your own. It's incredible that these things developed in the way they did, because there was no adult involvement. And as a matter of fact by the time adults did get involved they usually ruined the things.

One of the things that's really interesting about *The Idealist* is you have photos in there that would typically be described as fine art photography but there are also photos documenting the subculture in a really aesthetically creative way with the unifying theme of idealism.

Now you've got *Recognize* out, which is a book of aesthetically pure cloud photos. You're really running the full spectrum there, from the more heavily weighted to beautifully photographed cultural statements to stuff that seems more about an aesthetic statement. Even in *Recognize* you've said that there's actually a bit of commentary about the lack of quality in the art world that's implicit in that body of work.

To me, all the books have the fuck you attitude. Relative to what's going on in the world today with art, I'm kind of more a purist in the sense that I like the old masters better than the contemporary artists. There are very few contemporary artists who I respect. Being articulate through your work and your voice







TO JUST  
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ART, **THAT'S  
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is an incredible thing to be able to do, but it's even more incredible when you actually have fucking something to say, which most people don't. I see a lot of art out there that just doesn't say anything to me. It's dribble or it's doodling. Not that there isn't a place for that, I just don't believe it's on gallery walls or museums. Just draw stuff for yourself.

You had told me it was partially a reaction to very snapshotty photography that was somehow passing as high art.

There's some point in the early '90s where the dumbing down of America spread to the art world. It was really discouraging, in fact sickening to me, to see this stuff that was being considered for publication in magazines and even later put into art galleries and respected in art circles. The truth is that most art is based on the theory of the Emperor's New Clothes. Everyone says it's so, so everyone believes it's so. I have never been one to follow in that way, and neither of the people I've portrayed for most of my career. That's why they're Fuck You Heroes because they aren't taking the shit that's being shoveled to them. You know it's interesting, even when there became a point where artists became kind of lazy because, fuck it, they weren't even artists, they were people calling themselves artists. You're a graffiti artist or you're a painter or you're a doodler, do it at home, do it for yourself, put it

on your walls, please. Speak on the walls of the city; tell me something I don't already know. But fuck, do you think you belong on a gallery wall or in a book? Why are you wasting the paper, why are you wasting my time?

All of a sudden I'm looking at magazines and I'm seeing photos that are out of focus, not composed, as if you just don't give a shit. I don't care if it's documentary, it isn't shocking to me and I've seen it all before and so has everyone else. You don't even have to study art to know its bullshit, right? So with *The Idealist* I thought let's show people it isn't just about that. Don't just capture the moment; you have to capture it in the way that's respected. Just like you do with art, you're interpreting things and speaking to people but you're doing it articulately, you're doing it as a true master. That's the kind of art that I respect, people who respect their own forms.

You know Larry Clark, Terry Richardson, that aesthetic? It's zero. It's nothing, it's worthless. It tears down everything that every great photographer has tried to build.

People told me when I made *The Idealist* that just to even put out a book that doesn't focus on one subject is ridiculous; how could you put out a book with skateboarding and music and just landscapes, and have it all tie together? And I say if you look at it and you don't see it, then you just don't know and you obviously aren't that type of a person that understands good art. Which is fine, not everyone does understand good art. This book was trying to show people what it is and what it can be. Whether it's in a surrounding that they understand, those youth cultures that I've already covered or a tree in a field, it's all connected. The sad thing is it didn't speak as well as I thought it would and maybe wasn't as radical as it had to be.

That's why five years later I made *Recognize*, which takes the most universal of all themes, because I can't imagine anything more

Ian MacKaye, Minor Threat  
Washington, DC  
August 1982  
(From *Fuck You Heroes*)

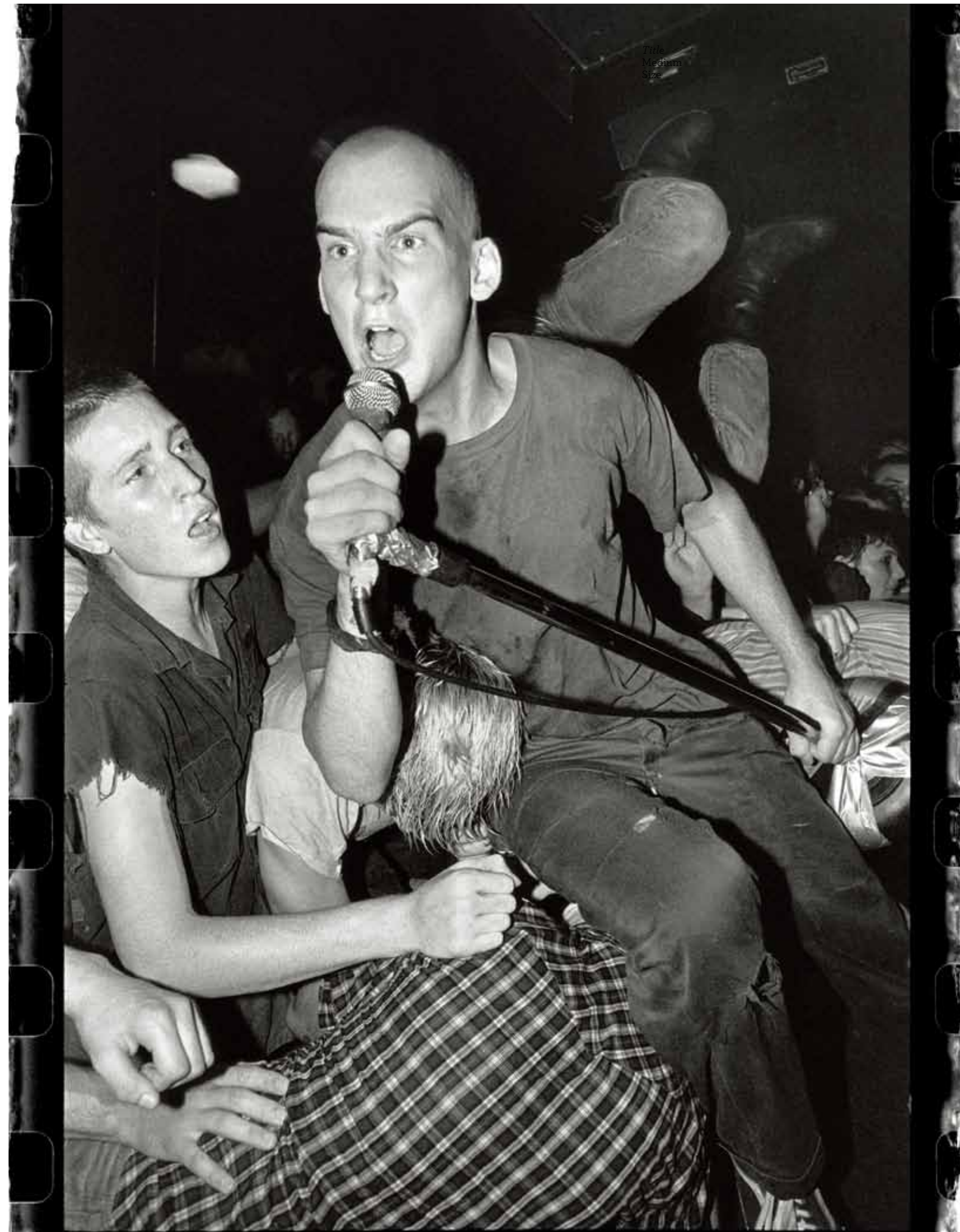
universal than a cloud on this entire planet, for no one has not seen a cloud. I mean there are plenty of people that haven't seen a mountain or a body of water, but no one hasn't seen a cloud. And really recognize it's fucking Photography 1 for you assholes. Here we go, we're going to learn from the beginning. Here's composition and character in a subject that's always changing. It was so challenging and so incredible sitting in coach in the back of a plane waiting for clouds to go by and having seconds to capture those images and only milliseconds to compose them as perfectly as I did into the art that they are. Again there's no words in there, other than the Foreword and Afterword that explain this, and hopefully it's inherent in the photographs where I've come and where I'm at that art is important and form is important. To just take a snapshot and call it art, or make a drawing and call it graffiti and art, that's bullshit to me.

The one thing you haven't said here is that you said you wanted to realign the aesthetic. That you felt the standard had fallen fairly low and that somebody needed to make some sound photographs that were technically strong and beautiful and very acceptable, and I think you achieved that.

Realigning the aesthetic is the absolute perfect quote because that's exactly what the goal was with *Recognize*. You look at the title, it tells you to recognize what's going on around you. Recognize beauty and not take the bullshit. To get it. It really is another fuck you.

It's a really strong statement. Let's discuss your show at Subliminal and what's inspiring you now. With all the different things you've worked in, is there anything around that excites you?

What I'm excited by now is my new son. He's a year and a half old and he's pretty much taken up all my time. And that's the way I want it. The reality is he probably came along at this time because I wasn't being inspired by much else, other than my friends.



Title  
Medium  
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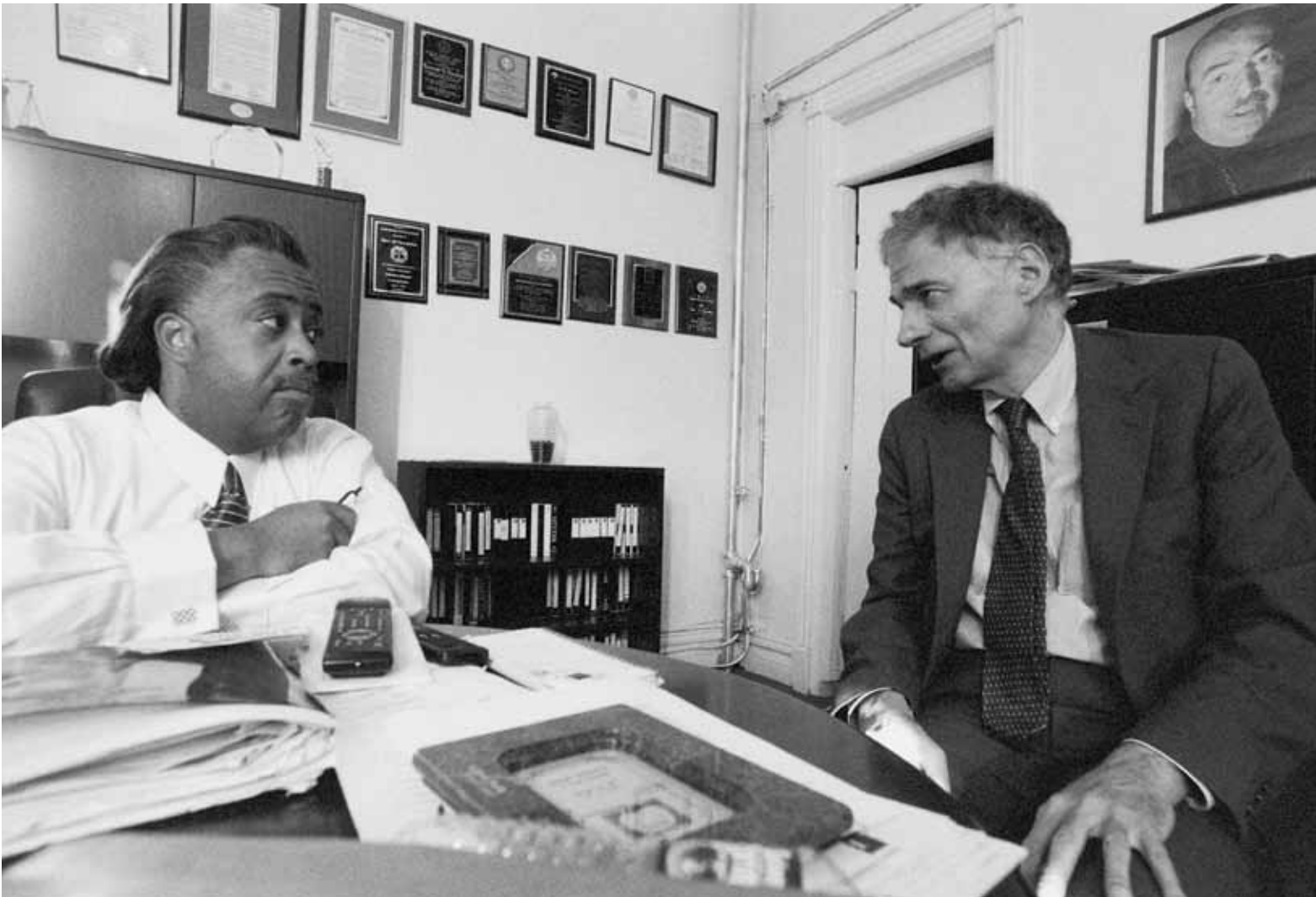


JUXTAPOZ

*Public Enemy Escape*  
*It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*  
New York City  
January 1988  
(From *The Idealist*)

*Rev Al Sharpton and Ralph Nader*  
Harlem, New York City  
November 6, 2000  
(From *The Idealist*)

SKATEBOARDING  
IS PUNK ROCK  
AND PUNK  
ROCK IS  
SKATEBOARDING  
AND HIP-HOP  
IS PUNK ROCK  
AND SKATE-  
BOARDING IS  
HIP-HOP.



My time to be inspired hasn't really come and gone. Of course I'm inspired by things I see everyday in life, but to the degree where I'm actually going to document them and share them with other people it's up to the other young people to do it for themselves now. I don't want to be the old guy at the fucking skatepark shooting pictures of kids 20 years younger than me. There should be young photographers doing that. There should be photographers the same age as the bands that are playing taking pictures of those bands if that's what inspires them.

One thing that's more inspiring me to me now is Internet culture in a lot of ways. There's a lot of bullshit out there and you have to sift through all this shit but there's incredible stuff going on. Even the success of that incredible image you made of Obama. If it weren't for the Internet, it wouldn't have spoken the way it did. The viral aspect that happens with communication on the Internet is an incredible thing.

There's a lot of ways that having children will inspire both of our art that might not immediately be recognized as cause and effect but ultimately it will be there. So how did you feel about the *Idealist Propaganda* show at

Subliminal? That was the largest collection of your work in one place at one time, correct?

Right. I think it was an incredible show; I was really happy with it. I've been in spaces literally 10-times larger than what we had there with less work. But honestly what you were getting at before, is why did we do this at this time? I haven't had a show in Los Angeles in five years, and we started this show thinking it would only be *Recognize*. You and everyone at the gallery wanted to see more of the old work as well. Eventually you were able to convince me, because of your conviction and your feelings toward my work, it made sense to just put everything in there. To see all the stuff in one facility spread over three rooms was great; I think a lot of people came through and people were inspired and were able to see the connection in the work and be inspired by it. That's really what it's all about.

I wanted to do it that way and that's why I thought *Idealist Propaganda* was such a good name for the show, because people often compartmentalize things they're passion-ate about in ways where even they don't recognize the connection to a lot of the different things they do. In a lot of your work there are many important connections, but diversity as well,

and seeing that you tackled all these different subjects and made really beautiful photographs with it all at once should be empowering to anyone who thinks, "Well, I'm a photographer, I've got to do this one style, this one subject." You dispelled that notion with your career. I was really excited to have it.

Everything I've been involved with over the years, more or less you were there shaping and documenting it before me. It was an honor for me to host your show. Since we've been able to collaborate it's been amazing to be able to illustrate from your photos and make an iconic art piece that builds on and hopefully amplifies the original intent of the photograph, or at least delivers it to a different audience so there's a cross pollination. Because what you've done is so important.

Whether people understand it or not, it's more obvious with you, but we're both propagandists. We're both idealist propagandists.

For more information about Glen E Friedman, contact [Burningflags.com](http://Burningflags.com).

