

▼ Art

Power to the People
 Edited by Geoff Kaplan
 University of Chicago Press
 264 pp., \$45

Four-Color Revolution

Protest that got your hands dirty **BY R. C. BAKER**



Images courtesy University of Chicago Press

In his introduction to this superbly illustrated compendium of underground newspapers, editor Geoff Kaplan channels the 1960s' exuberant ad-hoc vibe by referring to his book as "Power of the People," despite the title on the cover—*Power to the People*. The more inclusive *of* offers insight into the cultural power exuded by the 700 color reproductions gathered here, all culled from papers published between 1964 and 1974.

Kaplan posits that the brash, sometimes outrageous graphic treatments used by underground designers represented a "vehement challenge to the dominance of official media." A revolution in information technology back in the mid-'60s made it possible for anyone to become a publisher—the only requirements were "an

IBM typewriter with interchangeable typefaces, a lot of artwork (cartoons, photographs, drawings, illustrations) and an urge to express his or her social, political, or cultural point of view." A confluence of history and demographics helped give rise to this onslaught of smudgy newsprint. The Baby Boomers were confronted with an unpopular war, and, as one essayist in the book points out, "the friction between draft age (18) and voting age (21)" and the use of LSD among many editors and designers "gave the social insurgency of the sixties, and the underground newspapers associated with it, their peculiar and distinctive stamp."

With youthful fervor shaping the politics and psychedelic drugs driving the look of the underground press, readers expected, and received, visual invective: The New York-based *Other Scenes* depicted a naked woman's rear end expelling the names of 1968's presidential candidates—Humphrey, Nixon, Wallace—in curling, piled-up letters. Often just as polemical, the London-based papers *Oz* and *The International Times* featured complex typography entwined with vivid illustrations. Like Beatles songs, the graphics coming out of Swinging London were a mix of sterling talent and witty production—one *Oz* cover splattered red ink over the famous photograph of South Vietnam's police chief executing a Vietcong infiltrator with a shot to the temple. (The caption ridicules President Johnson: "The Great Society Blows Another Mind.") An *International Times* cover gave theorist Guy Debord's seminal treatise, "Society of the Spectacle," the comic-strip treatment, with a female character proclaiming, "Culture? Ugh! The ideal commodity—the one that helps sell all the others!"

"DESTROY THE MUSEUMS—OUR STRUGGLE CANNOT BE HUNG ON WALLS."

**Top: the *Chicago Seed* (1969)
 Bottom: from *Old Mole* (1969)**

THE MUSEUMS—our struggle cannot be hung on walls." Stark black bars and a leaping Black Panther logo complement this ardent rhetoric. (Although *Power to the People* has been printed at lavish scale, keep a magnifying glass handy—the yellowed tabloids are necessarily reduced, but the text of the articles, by turns riveting and rambling, can often be discerned in these crisp reproductions.)

Some publications leavened politics with practical advice. The feminist organ *Off Our Backs* provided clear line drawings that in one issue explicated the proper insertion of a diaphragm and in another the correct way to change a tire—"a simple and gratifying task which has generally been left to men for cultural, not physical, reasons."

There are sly layout Easter eggs

scattered throughout *Power to the People*. In the upper left corner of one page, a splay-legged lass on the cover of the *San Francisco Express Times* welcomes the new year with a headline cribbed from "Sympathy for the Devil": "'69 — 'Pleased to Meet You—Hope You Guess My Name.'" In the lower right of the facing page, a *New York Times* headline reports "Free Concert Causes Huge Jam Near San Francisco," an early dispatch from the Rolling Stones' disastrous Altamont show that December.

"You may never have taken LSD," Amherst professor Nick Bromell once observed, "but America has." *Power to the People* concludes with stirring graphics from the *Chicago Seed* that reinforce this '60s spirit. Railing against a senseless war, pollution, and police violence while celebrating the many social and cultural advances of the time, this passionate artwork, like Renaissance painting, crystallizes a spirit that is obviously dated, but also timeless.

Seven American Deaths and Disasters

By Kenneth Goldsmith
 Powerhouse Books, 176 pp., \$19.95

The first bulletin comes amid pop songs and advertisements for Thanksgiving turkeys. You can imagine a secretary looking up from her typewriter, a mechanic rolling out from under a car, a soda jerk's hand stilled in midair.

Did someone on the radio just say the president had been shot?

Poet Kenneth Goldsmith has edited and transcribed moment-by-moment radio and television broadcasts of seven traumatic events in postwar American history, achieving on the printed page something akin to the always surprising emotional wallop that Andy Warhol's best "Disaster" paintings still pack.

Goldsmith begins with the JFK assassination, followed by the shooting of RFK five years later: "John . . . er, Robert Francis Kennedy died this morning at 1:40." He employs different fonts for each tragedy—classy Roman for the gunning down of John Lennon, techie sans-serif for the *Challenger* space shuttle explosion—and although there are only transcriptions on the page, your brain begins supplying inflections and images that flesh out the deadpan format. As the second World Trade Center tower collapses, you can hear aborning conspiracy theory in two reporters' on-the-spot observations.

"You'd almost think there was some type of secondary explosion."

"Ugh! Oh! I mean that's . . . that's . . . that's . . ."

"That would . . . that would . . . that would . . . And you have to wonder how that . . ."

"Let's just think about this logically."

"There is no logic."

"Oh my God!"

Add in the horror of the Columbine shootings and Michael Jackson's pathetic demise and you realize that, through his keen ear, Goldsmith has discovered something roiling the hearts of those left behind: sorrow, bewilderment, maybe survivor's guilt, and relief that, for now, your own bullet has been dodged.

