



# steven brodner

caricaturist

The Bush years were a boom time for Steve Brodner. A satirical illustrator known for stunning caricatures, he was blessed with an incredible cast of corrupt and venal characters as targets. Brodner has been turning up the graphic heat since the 1990s, and the Age of W didn't stand a chance. He is one of the best of what might be called the "second generation" of American graphic commentators, the first being David Levine, Edward Sorel, Jules Feiffer, and Robert Grossman. Brodner has created satire for more than 30 years, initially channeling the great Thomas Nast, then finding his own expressive style. The list of magazines and newspapers to which he's contributed sly commentary on presidential elections, controversial subjects, and outdoorsy events is long: *Harper's*, *National Lampoon*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Playboy*, *Spy*, *Esquire*, *The Progressive*, *The Village Voice*, *The Washington Post*, *Texas Monthly*, *Philadelphia* magazine—it goes on. He has been the editor of *The Nation's* cartoon feature, "Comix Nation," and throughout the 2008 election season, he talked as he drew for *The New Yorker's* "The Naked Campaign" videos. In 2008, an exhibition of his political work was mounted at the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. We caught up with Brodner after the election to talk about the art and politics of caricature, the "of course" moment, and raging against the machine.

## STEVEN HELLER

Print contributing editor, author, co-chair of the Designer as Author program at the School of Visual Arts

## STEVE BRODNER

Caricaturist, longtime political commentator, provocateur

**What is a caricature?** A cute way of thinking about caricature is like an inside-out sushi. The sushi maker can skillfully arrange for the sticky rice to be on the outside of the skin rather than on the inside, where it usually is. A caricature of anyone or anything can be rendered in a way in which what is on the inside of a subject can be brought to the surface. The story is most important to me here. There has to be a point; otherwise, it's a parlor game. Caricature is not the train you get on, but the town you're going to. / **What is a Brodner caricature?** It's an attempt at visual narrative. My goal is always to

have the visual and literal messages blend so well that you don't see a difference. Like the music and lyrics of a popular song, or in an opera. When you are lost in the enjoyment of the whole effect, the affair is seamless and seems effortless; the mechanics disappear and this then becomes a (good, we hope) experience for the viewer. / **Many of your caricatures are politically motivated. Do you believe that your art will have some impact on politics?** Nope. I learned a long time ago that the point of it has got to be the love of communication in pictures with strangers about important things in a way that has a chance to be meaningful and compelling. How people react is up to them. Some engage, some don't. My job is to light the lamp as best I can. / **How do you expect your viewer or reader to respond to your art?** You know that people will encounter the art in different circumstances, coming from different



*Bush/Reagan*, from *Mother Jones*, 1989.  
Art director: Kerry Tremain.

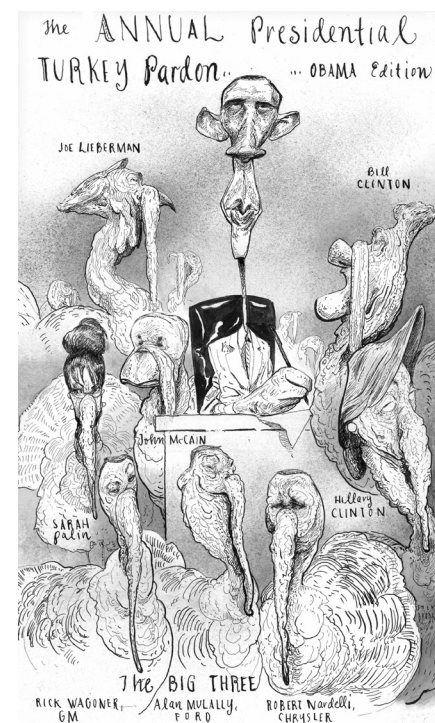
places. I want them to see it as honest: an attempt by someone who has not gotten the message that he ought to hide his feelings, and who wants to contribute a concise and passionate assessment of issues before the public, using visual language as effectively as possible. I was so gratified at the Norman Rockwell Museum recently to meet conservatives who were happy to talk politics because they saw in the work an element of reason and sincerity, even if, to them, it was wrongheaded. / [In this age when dirty tricks and negative campaigning is so prevalent, how does a caricature make any difference to the way people think?](#) I think caricature makes a difference when it has the “of course” moment. This is when a very well-realized idea is in the groove of the moment to so great an extent that it crystallizes what people are thinking, and because of that it cuts right to the heart of a subject and does it with a kind of grace. You see this in Hanoch Piven’s portrait of Jesse Jackson with a speaker for a mouth, Barry Blitt’s Obama/Osama cover for *The New Yorker*, Victor Juhasz’s illustration of George Bush getting an affectionate head-



Wayne Brattrude, from *The Progressive*, 1987.  
Art director: Patrick J. B. Flynn.

knuckle from Jesus. When you see this happen, you see something that is so dead on, you hit your head and say, “Of course”—although in Barry’s cover, it was a very taboo topic and made

people crazy. Also, there are a lot of people who had never encountered satire in print before. / [You’ve been on a mission—one of those proverbial missions from God—to revive respect in political art. Do you think you’ve succeeded?](#) I do get regular visits from God. She comes over because I have cable and Blue Moon beer in the fridge. I complain about my lower back, global warming, whether people will want political art. She says, “Look, nobody cares about this stuff. You draw pictures because you love it. So, yeah, you’ll be rewarded for it. You’ll have the pleasure in your work. And you’ll die happy and go to the astral plane feeling like you didn’t bullshit anyone and actually got to say true things in print and online. Shut up and draw.” / [You’ve done some powerful images—one for me when I was at \*The New York Times Book Review\* of Joe Stalin with hands covered in blood—and provoked a few angry letters \(ironic, no?\). Have you been attacked at all for your work during this past campaign?](#) I don’t consider disagreement or displeasure with a piece to be an attack against me. There have been some upset e-mails about pieces I’ve done—once, somebody sent me a thing I did torn into tiny pieces. You have to know it’s not about you. It’s about the stories people have had already in their brains. You sometimes become the moist host for their insect eggs. / [You were given a retrospective at the Norman Rockwell Museum—a rare thing for a political artist. How do you think this has changed the way people perceive political art, if at all?](#) When you go up there and see people respond to your work as a whole, it’s different than the reactions you get to individual pieces. When they see your trajectory of thought and sensibility, they get a personal sense of you and are very warm to what you are up to. Maybe that carries over into the way they see our whole genre. That would be nice. / [Do you consider yourself partisan?](#) I’m clearly a person who thinks that people’s problems can be solved by people. It’s hard to deny that a considerable part of human endeavor has been devoted to coping and conquering ignorance, illness, oppression, poverty. And there have been tremendous strides, basically because of people attacked as “liberal.” I feel the pursuit of figuring out problems is worth our trouble in this life. That would have to put me in the progressive end of things. I don’t think that keeps me from full-spectrum satire.



Turkey Pardons, from *The Los Angeles Times* Op-Ed page, 2008. Editor: Susan Brennehan.

All politics is about part recognition, part denial of true things. If we all focus on connecting the dots of the latter, and have at ’em, we will all be kept very busy. / [You’ve offered advice to editors and art directors on how to strengthen the role of the visual satirist. What would that be?](#) To understand that we as a graphic arts community have some very keen points of view and powerful delivery systems. We are authors and can be looked upon that way. Most of the awards I have won have been for stand-alone pieces that I have pitched to magazines. Brad Holland, Barry Blitt, Sue Coe, Bruce McCall, Joe Sacco, and others have shown how this works. Engaging with us as authors will keep approaches to coverage exciting and illuminating for readers. Also, illustration assignments usually come in at the last minute, after the piece has been assigned to a writer. Why can’t we get the assignment at the same time? This would enable greater collaboration. Greater amounts of time spent on work and a much better scene for everyone. / [Do you intend to do this—rage against the machine—for the rest of your career?](#) I’d be happy to go to the end finding ways to tell the truth in media as best I can. How can anyone not want to do that? 🗣️