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The Heart of New York

A few days before Halloween, a storm formed in the Atlantic that went from being a tropical depression to a hurricane called Sandy in the space of about six days. When it made landfall on the East Coast of the United States on the 29th of October, near Atlantic City, New Jersey, it flooded homes, inflicted billions in damage, crippled infrastructure and electricity, and killed people. New York is still crawling out from under the debris of Sandy, trying to return to a normal state of living as soon as it is able.

The accompanying image features the iconic “I ♥ NY” T-shirt, the standard piece of memorabilia for any visitor to “The City that Never Sleeps” for about forty years now. The original logo was designed by Milton Glaser, and remains a piece of advertising history, as the state song for New York is inspired by it and the original artwork for it resides in the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. It is one of the most recognized and most enduring pieces of advertising art, parodied and altered to fit the times it lives in.

It has been officially altered only once by Glaser himself. After 9/11, Glaser released a version of the logo (and inevitable shirt) reading “I ♥ NY More Than Ever,” which featured a small black spot on the heart design to indicate the approximate placing of the Ground Zero on the island of Manhattan.

This version is not official, and it remains to be seen whether it will resonate with New

Yorkers and the rest of the world like the original, or its 9/11 counterpart. The image here, still starting with the stark white shirt and traditional logo, has been dye-dipped in blue to indicate the high watermark left by Sandy and her floods that washed over the City, shutting off power and causing destruction. The design is deceptively simple; the artist, Sebastian Errazuriz, lives and works in New York, and was inspired to do this as a fundraiser (through Grey Area Art Gallery) for Sandy relief efforts. The simplicity then, is down to two things; simple images that shock the eye and surprise us out of the rut of what we expect to see are more effective, and with a one-step process for production, Errazuriz can mass produce these to order, thus bringing money in for his beloved city.

The photo of the shirt as it's shown here is by Jordan Doner, and he has set it up to evoke the simplicity of the original design. No one feels a studio image when they're ankle deep in seawater, but a plain hanger on a nail on piece of anonymous plywood is something people cleaning up their lives after a storm see every day. The rest of us either know that or have been through it ourselves, which is why it works as a backdrop for the shirt.

The artist has modified the shirt in the image (the art piece of the shirt and photo together is officially known as “I Still ♥ NY”) by causing the ink – symbolizing Sandy's rising waters – to drip off of the tail of the shirt, which evokes two things: tears, those of the people who have experienced loss and those who weep on their behalf, and also the ebb of the waters themselves. People coming back from the blow dealt by the storm.

The image is free of any text that would detract from what's already on the shirt, and everything in the image is centered, focused, and pointed right at the viewer. The content here is direct and subtle at the same time – direct inasmuch as there's little to no confusion as to what

this means or what it's for, but subtle because they expect you to be in that loop already. With less direct temporal proximity to recent current events, this image could become confusing. So it's an image with a bit of an expiration date built into it – as people felt the need to move on from the events of 9/11 and heal, so too will they purchase this to contribute to the fund, wear it and then put it away as they feel the need for Sandy to become increasingly a part of their collective past. That implied expiration date makes it more urgent to the time at hand, however, which is, after all, the point. “Buy this shirt and help people rebuild,” it says, before you can't help any more. The shirt's tipping point on the edge of relevancy implies that to a sophisticated viewer, and the simple shock and iconoclastic nature will get others to purchase one.

Up front and direct, this image, this art, and this shirt are together an exhortation to pay attention, as is all advertising, art, and advertising masquerading as art. In this case, however, the perfect fusion of graphic arts and commercialization may have come together to produce something of merit, which is a statement that cannot be made of all art, and even less so of most advertising.



Sources

The Grey Area Foundation for the Arts. gaffta.org

Jordan Doner Photography. jordandoner.com/photography.php

The Museum of Modern Art, New York City. moma.org

Sebastian Errazuriz. meetsebastian.com