

# Winston Smith

**"JUST KEEP ON JUMPING AS THE HOOP GETS HIGHER AND HIGHER. NOT ONLY IS THE GRASS NOT GREENER ON THE OTHER SIDE, THERE IS NO GRASS ON THE OTHER SIDE. IT'S ASTRO-TURF"**

**T**he name Winston Smith may sound familiar to you for two reasons. Reason number one being that he is the collage artist who did numerous record covers for the DEAD KENNEDYS. Reason number two being that his name is the same as a character in George Orwell's novel 1984. In reality, Winston Smith is an artist who has been creating a sort of cultural terrorism with the social commentary of his work. For the past twenty years, he has been carefully cutting and pasting images which he selects from old magazines, using famous paintings, propaganda, and advertising to create a juxtaposition of images that is meant to startle the viewer.

These images, which are powerful in their own right, have been manipulated by the mastermind of the subversive and clever artist. His brand of political humor is scathing as he attacks middle class values and the complacency of the American public. By using the inexpensive medium of collage (no computers are used), Winston Smith recycles the same images which he makes commentary on and by mixing them up and spewing them out they are used against their original intention. Their new context is humorous yet potent.

**UGLY PLANET: Let's start with your childhood, where did you grow up?**

WINSTON SMITH: I was born in Oklahoma and I left as soon as I could possibly manage to leave.

**Did you come straight to the Bay Area?**

No, when I was seventeen I kind of ran away from home. I went to Italy and went to school there. I stayed from the late sixties...until around 1976. So after about six or seven years I came back. It was not because of the war in Vietnam, but it was convenient that I was out of the country during the time because I was of draft age. And then by the time I came back the war was over.

**What kind of work were you doing back then?**

When I was a kid I used to cut things up that I would draw. I didn't cut things out of books or anything because I probably would have gotten my hide tanned. I would draw stuff and then cut that out and assemble it. At the time I didn't really know that there was a medium called collage. It was just my way of making pictures. When I was living back in Italy studying art, it was mainly academic stuff, Michelangelo, Leonardo Da Vinci, that kind of thing. So I can draw. I can't draw like Raphael, but I can draw pictures. That actually helped

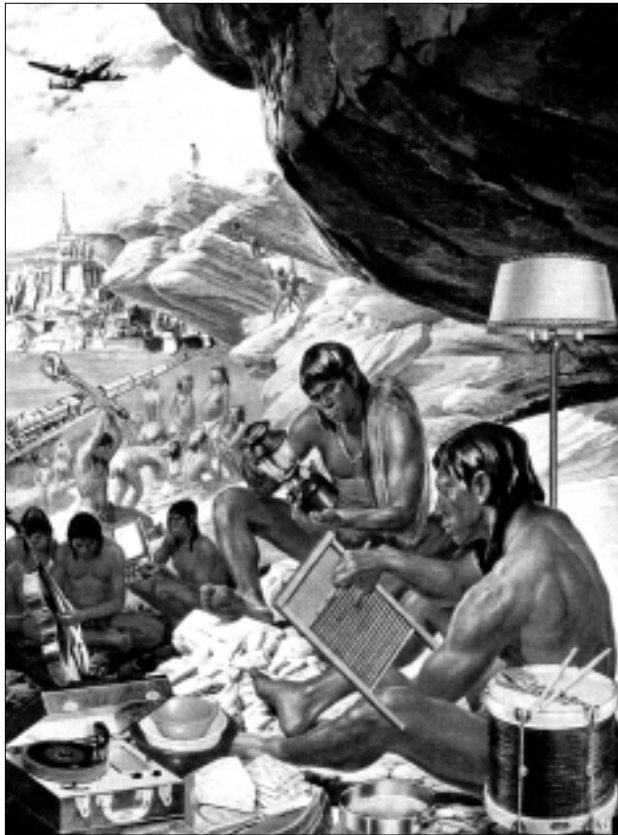
because I think it helped give me some sense of proportion. When you design something you get that perspective (the bigger people in the front, the small people in the back, etc.). So that helped. I still like that kind of artwork. Since coming back to America in the mid seventies I have almost exclusively done this kind of work.

**One thing I always wanted to ask you, what about copyright?**

The images I use are pretty much copyright-free because it's either in the public domain, like the Mona Lisa, or it's old enough, like from wartime, the thirties and forties or maybe even the fifties, where the copyright has elapsed. Also, most of what I take is stuff out of what would be throwaway art. It wasn't like I used a Coca-Cola bottle, or Mickey Mouse...it was like here's a picture of a watering can...an ad with garden tools. It wasn't like it was someone's masterpiece. I look at something that otherwise I think for the most part people regard as pretty mundane imagery... which, of course, it is mundane imagery from a very mundane period in our history, the postwar expanding economy of the fifties, when everything was going to be bigger and better and greater and it really never happened.

**There's been this myth of the "USA, the country where you do better than your parents did, and your parents did better than their parents did," and so forth...**

I was talking to a friend of mine about the fact that now people have to work twice as hard to stay in the same place...to get half as much sometimes. When I first came to San Francisco it wasn't that way. He said when he lived here...which was even ten years before that...early 1960's...he said you could get a job pretty easily. Maybe not a wonderful job, but you could get a job. Nowadays, you've got to wait in line for the bad ones. He said it's really basically all about rent. You were always told in high school, "Never pay more than a quarter of your income for rent." Well, now you've got to pay more than half your income for rent. Before, people did have money for food and savings, making payments on a used car or to go out with their friends and enjoy themselves. Also they had leisure time to agitate for social change. All that happened during the sixties, especially because of the youth boom, the postwar baby boom. You had all these people the same age who suddenly realized this whole society has been feeding us a line of crap. I think in the early 70's they probably figured, "How can we get these people distracted from having time to go out



there and protest about save the whales and stop the war and labor disputes and things." I think it was kind of deliberately calculated bit by bit to tweak down the options and tweak up the pressure so that...for example, when I left the US in the late sixties, that's how it was and when I came back in the mid 70's there was no more fighting in the streets and no more protests. And when I'd talk to people they'd go, "Oh man, we can't be concerned with that any longer. I've got my family to feed and I've got my house to get and I've got this car I want to buy and I've got this new color TV I want to get, and things are never going to change anyway... Nixon, whoever, they're all the same." There was a cynicism that came out of it and also this "me first" attitude which I think allowed, half a decade later...for Reagan to be easily elected because he appealed to the greed in everyone. Not just the "me" decade, but the "me first" decade (at the expense of everyone else), is what it boiled down to. Of course, in the meantime all the media has been quietly gobbled up by about seven or eight giant corporations, so 90% of the media is controlled by Time Warner, Viacom, Disney...etc.

**You came back in the seventies to San Francisco. When did you move out to the country, up to Northern California?**

Around 1981. I decided to experiment with living outside of civilization. I think I learned more about America by living over in Italy than I ever learned in America. We're like an island. It's a big ocean here and an ocean there. We're a captive audience, literally. The rest of the world just laughs at the United States. We think they're afraid of us, like they think we're powerful. I was there in 1980 and these people were saying, "How can the Americans be such 'bambini,' that you elect a millionaire movie star for president?" I moved out to the country off in the woods and built a cabin. There's still no electricity, no running water, no telephone, no electric lights. Most of the work in my books, and a lot of the rest of this, were all done by kerosene lamps...all under nineteenth century conditions. Some people look at

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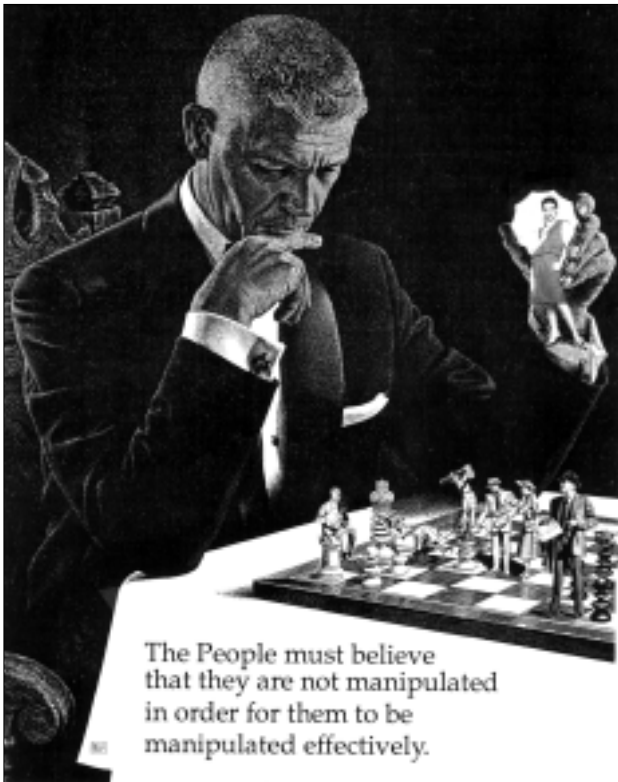
my stuff and say it was too urban. Hell, it's not even from the Twentieth Century - hardly even the Nineteenth Century!

**The first time I was exposed to your work was around 1982, with DEAD KENNEDY's LPs like Fresh fruit For Rotten Vegetables, In God We Trust, and Plastic Surgery Disasters. Looking at your collages back then, I thought that you were watching TV all the time, living in the city and experiencing media overload.**

Actually I hadn't watched television since 1969. I was living out in the woods. There's not even an address. You would have to walk maybe half a mile to see someone else and a couple of miles another direction to see anybody. A lot of solitude and no distractions to create things, but apparently I guess I've absorbed by osmosis what's going on in society without having to sit in front of a television set for eight hours a day. I go back and forth. I live there back and forth during the year a lot now.

**How did you meet Jello Biafra?**

When the punk thing started to emerge in San Francisco around '76 or '77, I'd go to different shows and I got in touch with people who were doing work for an organization in England called Rock Against Racism. They had the same thing here, although I haven't heard much of it for a couple of years. I started doing posters for bands. This friend of mine kept saying, "You've got to meet this guy I know. He thinks just like you. You guys were separated at birth." I remember thinking, "Anyone who thinks like me, I don't know if I want to meet him. It could be dangerous." It turned out to be kind of a happy association over the years because a lot of the work that I do is associat-



©1980, Winston Smith

ed with their music. Being that they're a pretty good band and they weren't this half-assed band that went no place...that would have been more disappointing. Although I've done lots of artwork for half-assed bands too.

**In your work, as in the DEAD KENNEDY's songs... there is a serious problem being addressed with great wit and humor...**

One thing about BIAFRA is he has a good sense of humor about things. Things that could be regarded as quite tragic for humanity and for the country, but in the long run they're actually totally absurd.

**It's the same thing with your work. At first you want to laugh. You could show it to a five-year-old and they say, "Oh, that's funny," or someone who is not even thinking about politics, and they'd think it's funny, but then you can also take it one step deeper...**

They're allegories. That's how I see my work. In the middle ages, in the renaissance, they would paint pictures of truth and justice and beauty and they would use people. There would be this guy coming out on a chariot and they're all allegorical themes to represent certain situations. Now what we do is we have caricatures used in political cartoons and those are allegories. Some guy with money bags and a top hat...he's a capitalist. Someone else is a commie union organizer. A lot of these things are shorthand just because they're images that all of us have seen.

**Do you see a lot of the kids who are now 14-16 who didn't grow up in the sixties and seventies...do you think they can see the same thing in your work?**

I've had a lot of people that age walk up to me who like it. One guy was saying at a show the other day...it made me kind of embarrassed...he goes, "Your work really opened my eyes." Which is good because that is what I kind of was hoping for. It's like everything we were saying... you reach a certain point where it dawns on you, "Wow, this is the situation." Your eyes are open because you see either a real high-contrast picture or image or situation that is sharply in opposition and that really opens your eyes because it reduces to very simplified images or pictures what is a complicated and involved idea. People of course will say you're simplifying it. Well, yeah, you've got to simplify it. That's how you have to do it. It's like a filmmaker making a story that's two hours covering someone's entire life. You've got to leave things out and read a couple things in and condense stuff and kind of exaggerate stuff in order to make a point. Someone will say,"You're taking this too far. You're exaggerating...Christ on a cross of dollars." No, I'm not. There's nothing really subtle about that at all. It's right under their nose. Some people are so dense they wouldn't even notice that. When that EP came out they had cops in England raiding record stores because there were old anti-heresy laws about mocking the deity. It would be okay to mock Buddha but you can't mock their deity. I wasn't even mocking them. I was actually mocking the worship of money. Of course the right-wing TV preachers were upset because they thought it was sacrilegious. Actually, in a sense it was, for them, because their religion was dollars. I was offending their god.

**Back in the early 90's, there was some criticism about GREENDAY hiring you to do their Insomniac album cover... mostly because they're a successful rock band and you an underground artist...**

Regarding my work for GREENDAY...the best



"Welcome To The World" ©1987, Winston Smith

part about that is that I didn't have to water down my vision to get it out there. It wasn't like they said, "Gee, we really like this stuff but can you put a little fuzzy bunny here or a little fluffy unicorn or the rainbow or something." Those guys, Tre, I've known him since he was a teenager up near where my ranch is. He's been to my ranch a couple times. He hasn't changed much. I'm glad to see that he's made some success out of what he does. Making money or not making money is not really the point. It's being able to afford to do what you're doing. Fortunately I get by on my artwork. I'm not wealthy. I scramble every month to pay the rent. I don't have any insurance or any of that stuff.

If I get hit by a truck today or tomorrow I'd be in the charity section of the hospital. I'm just hoping that I drop dead before my teeth give out on me because I can't afford to go to the dentist. As for Tre, I think basically he came out of a background where his folks were very blue collar working class. Bill and Mike came from backgrounds of pretty lower class beginnings and Bill's mom had to work all her life to take care of her kids. And now finally she's able to relax and have an easy older age. There's nothing wrong with that. Also, they've actually put more money back in the scene themselves because they've recorded a bunch of people who otherwise



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could never be able to get their demos out. They've done a whole bunch of stuff for benefits, and have raised money for worthwhile organizations. It would be nice to be in that position. I mean, I'm not in that position, but it would be nice to be able to help someone.

**As an artist, what are your thoughts on "freedom of speech"? Myth?**

In America we think we have freedom of speech, but here you can do anything you want and say anything you want as long as it doesn't mean anything. As soon as you do or say anything that is really meaningful, they'll stop you. Then you find out what real revolution is. We can sit here. I mean in my case I'm literally a total coward. I'm saying these things from the safety of my little work studio where I can cut a picture and slap them down and go xerox them for some magazine someplace. If I were in El Salvador or China... I would probably have disappeared a long time ago. Those are the people that deserve our admiration and respect because they have put their life on the line and they've struggled against all odds to get away from that. It's going to change. I mean, a lot of it is not going to change even when they say, "Oh, it's different now." It may be a little better just because they've exchanged one death squad for new death squads or one dictator for another dictator. I think the reason they keep the sports, music and entertainment industry and television is because they know it keeps us off the streets. If tomorrow all the television sets in the United States stopped working, within 24 hours, or maybe at max within a week, you'd have masses of people marching in the streets just causing havoc. It would be a totally non-directional revolution. Just give me my entertainment and leave me alone. Bread and circuses.



**For Americans, war or revolution is something that happens else where, and we watch it on the TV. In most other countries, people have the real thing outside their door, or they're out fighting and protesting, protecting their families.**

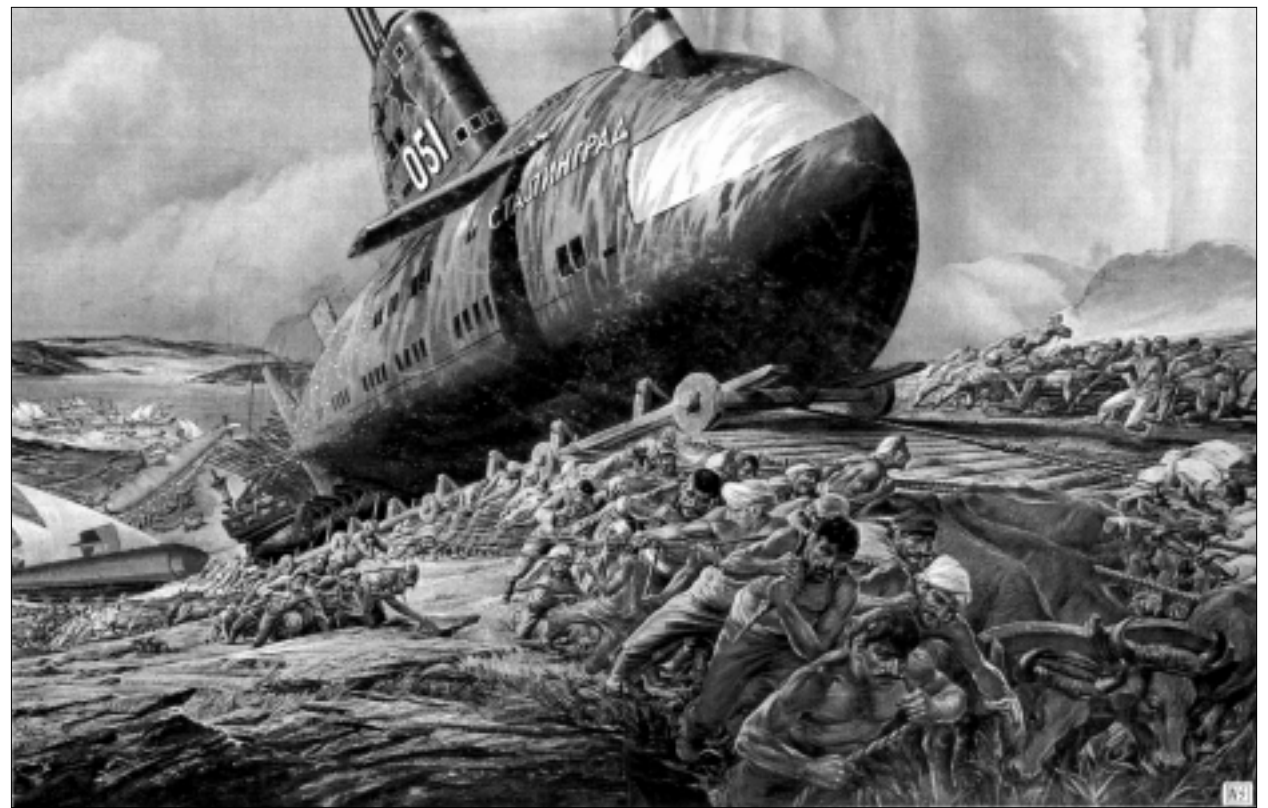
They're organized and they're not distracted by public shows on television. In Ancient Rome corruption was everywhere too. As the Romans were conquering the world, the first thing they would do whenever they built a new colony was build an arena where they had games, animal combat, torture, all kinds of entertainment. This was necessary to keep people distracted from what was really happening. Instead of bringing back fruit and grain from Africa to feed their people, Roman ships would come back with sand to cover the arena...to absorb the blood from all combat. (At the arena) it didn't cost to get in. It was free. It was like television...turn it on and watch it. It was actually freer than television. You didn't buy the set. You just walked down and walked right in the door. It was free because they wanted you to be distracted so you would be so entertained and so caught up with the scores. In Italy, or anywhere in America...all over the world...soccer, football...people are nuts for it. It's amazing. I'm not really a sports fiend or anything but it's amazing how people get (so into it). When I first moved to Italy, the first week or two, I was walking down the street with my schoolmates and I saw

this little guy standing in the street wearing black pants, black coat, talking to another guy. He was fuming. His face was red. I asked: "What are they arguing over...politics? No, no, no, they weren't arguing. They were just talking about football...soccer. That's how they express themselves. Like in England they kill each other over football. If you took that away...they don't care what the hell kind of government they've got...things like football or television...the whole world goes up in flames. These are pacifiers. What they're doing now...Republicans, the whole welfare reform thing to cut off welfare and it makes the politicians look like they're tough on crime, but it makes them look good because they're taking a stand against the manufactured enemy. We don't have Communists to kick around so now we can kick around the poor. So now it's a crime to be poor. There are ten to fifteen people for every job in California. Every time there is a job that's available there are 100 people in line or a thousand people in line for it. It just means that people turn to crime

to feed their kids...feed themselves. So it means there will be more and more crime and less and less security. People then have a sense to vote for right-wing republican politicians that promise you more security which never will happen. It's very symbiotic. It feeds on itself. It's like the drop of acid in the middle of a donut that gets bigger and bigger until you have a donut that turns into a thin little ring and there's nothing...we've become in this country like a big fortress around nothing. More than that in repressing other countries. We supply the arms and all these techniques for oppression and torture and all kinds of things. They train people to do all kinds of stuff. I think that's being done in those places so they can collect the information so they can eventually use it here. I truly believe that that's around the corner. Hopefully not for a

long time, but I think that that's part of why it's being done. They know they can't do these things in America because people get up in arms and say, "Well, what about the first amendment and these rights?" In these other countries they don't have that so no one can do anything. They can just brush them aside. These buildings downtown in San Francisco... built in the last twenty-five years or so...are all built for...they use this euphemism "crowd control." That means a "riot." The buildings automatically have doors just like in castles. It's like castle mentality. These castles that you see in the old countries in England or Italy or Spain...these things weren't built to protect the village. They were built to protect themselves inside the castle from the people in the village. It wasn't for another country, it was themselves. It's like what is happening now. Socially it's going back to the middle ages. They want to establish a New Feudalism. All of the wealthy who can afford it have walls. They have walled communities with private guards and electronic ways to get in and out and security. In the middle ages if you weren't inside the walls of the village or the town it was bad because outside was chaos. That's the word "paradise"...it's an Arabic word that means "walled garden". The word comes from the idea of excluding other people from your garden. This is my heaven because you can't get in. That's the idea

"Babylon Burning" ©1997, Winston Smith



"Arms Race Is A Drag" ©1988, Winston Smith

behind the walled society. People who share the idea that "You have to be just like me,"

**We think we're civilized, yet we're still living the way we were five hundred or a thousand years ago.**

What is happening now in America, it is almost a mirror version of what was happening exactly a hundred years ago in the 1890's when the big guys controlling the government and the railroads and means of production and giant factories and shipping lines and everybody else was working for like ten cents a day. I think what they're trying to do is bring that age back, so that's what is happening now. We're just doing it to other parts of the world. Every day with every "downsizing" that happens here and with every factory that is opened in some other part of the world it means that this part of the world is getting close to that. The new world is getting closer to the third world. Why pay someone \$4.50 an hour when you can pay somebody \$2 a day (in a third world country) and there's no safety...if he loses his fingers, he can take a hike. If people think, "We should stop the immigrants from coming into this country and taking our jobs". They wouldn't have to leave their countries to come here if things weren't so bad in their country...mainly because we helped make it that bad. We've helped to impoverish them in order to keep whatever dictator. Like Mobutu, he was an American puppet for the

"Forced Fed War" ©1982, Winston Smith



last twenty years. His personal worth is like four billion dollars which is like twice the gross national product of (his country) Zaire. He had the money in Switzerland's banks. He had property in New York City and Los Angeles.

**After the civil rights movement of the 60's, and so many other movements that followed, I suppose we've gone through a lot of changes in the United States. For a while it seemed like we were on track to becoming a place that could truly represent justice and equality (for all people). But now it all seems short lived.**

Newt Gingrich said something years ago...someone had asked him, "What is your plan? What do you plan to do? You're trying to instill these family values and laws." He said, "Well I just want to bring America back to the way it was in the mid fifties when everything was right about America. You want to know what I'm talking about? Go find yourself an old 1955 Saturday Evening Post or Life magazine then you'll see the way America was and the way America should be". I've got 1955 Saturday Evening Posts. Hell, I was there in 1955! It was awful...sexism and racism... blacks couldn't go to school with whites...foreigners couldn't get jobs... there was union busting. There was abuse of the law. There was police brutality. Women... their only job was to be a housewife. First of all he's even saying go back to never never land. These are

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"How About A Little Safe Sex? (#2)" ©1987, Winston Smith



the Jones' of the past that we're going to live up to. There were no Jones's. Everyone was living by the skin of their teeth. Who knows, maybe he is saying, "Yes, I want us to go back to this racism and ageism and sexism and social injustice that really put the Republicans in the driver's seat." If they can keep you under the thumb long enough...whole generations are born that don't think there's anything wrong with that. Think of the generations of peasants in the middle ages who worked like dogs and had nothing. Every now and then someone would say, "Hey what are we doing this for?" "Shut up. Don't rock the boat. It's always been this way. It'll always be this way. Don't make any trouble." The first time someone did make trouble they'd get their head cut off. I really think they're trying to bring it back to that. I think it's going to be a soft, friendly-fascist way to do it, but it won't be...they won't goose step into the front room with bayonets. It's that whole idea about the frog being put in the cold water and then you slowly turn the heat up... because if you put the frog in boiling water he'll hop right out. "Shit. This is dangerous." but if you put the frog in cold water and slowly turn it up then the frog just boils and he won't even notice. We're the frogs in the boiling water, but it's not quite to the boiling point yet. They keep it just under boiling level. No one is aware. Slowly the frog goes to sleep because it gets so nice and warm. Then he's cooked.

I look out my window on the bay and see giant ships go by. There's this ship that brings in these huge barges that are four times bigger than a football field with tons of crap from China that goes all over Northern California, all over the west here to Walgreens or Kmart and Payless and all these chain stores. When those ships come in, those are our jobs going away...not that we all want to make plastic Tupperware or anything, but also in those other countries where they manufacture these plastic things or automobile stuff (like the Ford Motor Company... their motors are made in Indonesia because the labor force is basically under their thumb), it also means that when they do this the companies can pour the fluid and the waste materials from these chemicals anywhere. Americans get outraged by chemical companies, but the rest of the whole world is a chemical

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company. Americans get outraged over Love Canal. But the rest of the world is becoming a Love Canal world. It's an outrage against humanity. It's not like there's not enough to go around. There's plenty to go around. If people just lower their sights a little bit and not have this opulence. I mean, everybody... India, Africa, South America, China...those people could probably live as well as lower middle class Italians of the 1970's where you had one car in the family, not two or three, and maybe one television. Even when I lived there we didn't have television sets. There was only one channel, so why bother. There is a way to do that, but the idea to get people to work for peanuts is to make an exclusivity of availability to make sure that the food or the shelter is not available so we'll work twice as hard to have half as much and be happy with it.

**Like in that movie El Norte, towards the end, the sister says to her brother "They told us we could make a lot of money in America, but they never told us there would be so much to spend on."**

In America people have become spoiled and, of course, because of this we demand that the rest of the world go without in order that we have more than we need. It's not even that we have "enough," it's that we have more than we need.

**I see large companies buying out the smaller companies, just to shut them down. Independent family owned stores are an endangered species. Anywhere you go today all you see is MEGA-STORES! and SUPERSTORES! It's not unusual to see people who used to own**



"Till Death Do Us Part" ©1993, Winston Smith

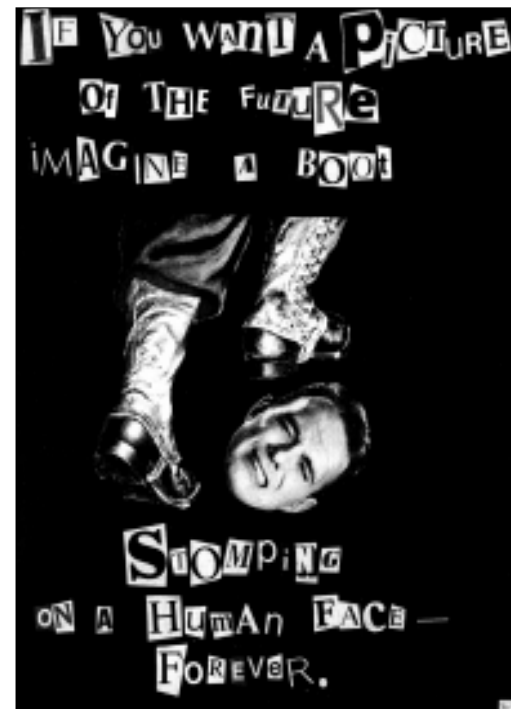
"Separation Of Church And State" ©2001, Winston Smith



**their own stores now working at the Megastore.**

It's a typical colonial practice that goes back hundreds of years. What the British did in India and what the British did in America and what Americans do all over the world. In Mendocino... when I first moved there in the early eighties...you'd walk on the main street and there's a cobbler and a little shoe shop, dime store, stationery store. There were all these mom and pop stores. The people who lived there owned the shops and they owned houses there and the money stayed in the community. Then Wal-Mart and Safeway come in. The money that stayed in the community with everybody else all went under. It went broke. Whereas now people go to the discount shops... And that money goes to Chicago or to Los Angeles, but it doesn't stay in the community. It goes away. They would lower the price when they came in. They could afford to. They had shops all over North America so they could say, "Oh these things cost \$2 a piece, we'll sell them for a dollar and a quarter so everybody comes over here." When mom and pop go out of business they can say, "Now they're \$2.50," because there ain't no place else to go. And that's the typical thing with the demand...eliminate the competition. We've always been brought up to think that capitalism brought competition and free enterprise. Capitalism is basically about murdering your competition...eliminating them so that you can then exploit not just the workers, but the customers who have no place to turn. That is happening more and more. This neighborhood (North Beach) is one of the only neighborhoods left that really is a little neighborhood area (in San Francisco). This, The Mission, and The Haight. There used to be these cool stores, like this hardware store, you could go and get anything you wanted. You go up to the guy and he'd show you how to do something. Now, it's a restaurant. As if we need more restaurants and bars in this area. Another shop turned into a bar...a cobbler turned into a bar. All these service places are now all bars or restaurants...the real estate is so expen-

©1983, Winston Smith



sive because the city is only seven miles across. It ain't going to get any bigger...whoever owns the property is jacking up the rent so that nothing can stay there that isn't making a lot of money all at once. It's kind of sad because it means people come here because they like this neighborhood and then because everyone comes here there's no more neighborhood.

**When and why did you change your name to Winston Smith?**

When I came back to the United States...actually I had used the name a few times before that for a couple of years as one of about half a dozen different silly pen names. [Winston Smith] seemed to be perfectly appropriate for the force of the ideas behind a lot of my artwork. I mean, no matter what you want to call yourself...the government still calls you 003-88-7173, you can even call yourself "Popeye Squirm" or anything you want. It makes no difference. I had to go to court and change it. It cost me \$25. Women do it all the time when they get married. The guy who is the judge, his name was Judge Smith, He goes, "Oh I see nothing wrong with that name." I was glad it went over his head because I didn't want him to say, "What do you think? You think this is a fascist dictatorship??" The world as we know it now...even in 1984. It's a whole lot weirder than Orwell conceived. They don't even have tele-cameras watching everybody. Now with credit cards and the internet and purchases being recorded, everything can be recorded. It's not because they want to control you legally. It's so they can control you economically. Instead of putting you behind bars, our jails are economic. Take everything away that you have at which point you'll comply with anything just to get back half of what they took away. I think that is the wave of the future. Orwell said, "If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stomping on a human face forever." Actually what has come to pass instead is: "if you want a picture of the future imagine a Nike shoe jogging down 5th Avenue for—EVER". ☺

Stay tuned for next issue, when we revisit Winston Smith. More politics and more artwork. He's getting ready to publish his third book. Visit: [www.winstonasmith.com](http://www.winstonasmith.com)