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Kiss-Off

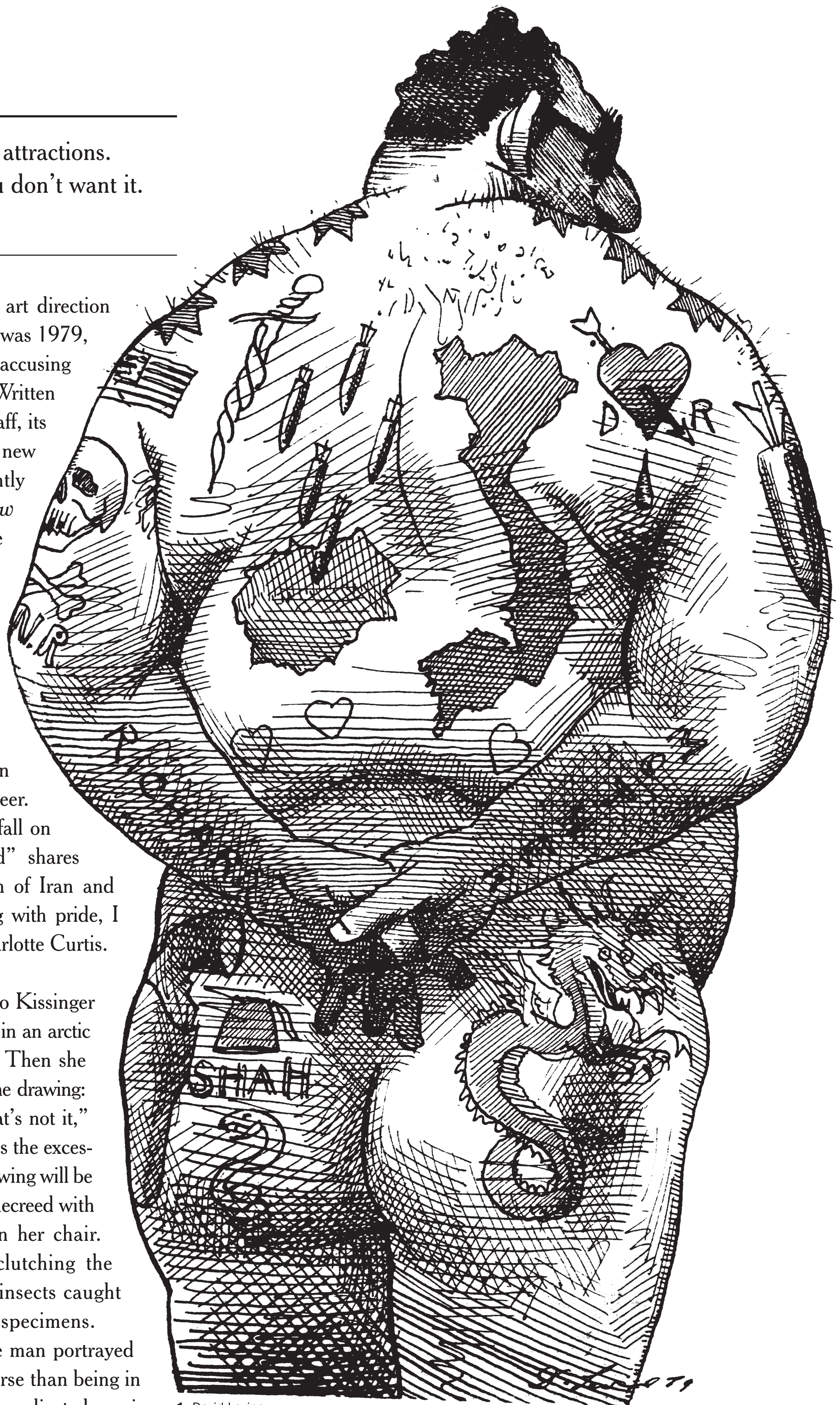
Art is dangerous. It is one of the attractions.
When it ceases to be dangerous, you don't want it.
ANTHONY BURGESS

I'd scarcely embarked on the task of Op-Ed art direction when I set off an unseemly spectacle. The year was 1979, and Sunday's lead piece was to be an essay accusing Henry Kissinger of catastrophic war crimes. Written by influential foreign policy author William Pfaff, its authoritative tone called for bold art. Although new to New York and the *Times*, I was sufficiently conversant with the superb oeuvre of shrewd *New York Review of Books* caricaturist David Levine to think he'd be ideal to illustrate Pfaff's stinging prose. Eager to ensure that he'd take the job, I gave the artist carte blanche. After all, I reasoned, no illustration could skewer the controversial statesman as harshly as our text's blistering attack.

Levine jumped at the chance and delivered a satiric tour de force [figure 1]. Tattooed on the diplomat's back are hallmarks of his career. Shoulder hairs become Arabic script, bombs fall on Cambodia, and Vietnam darkens; "Richard" shares forearm billing with "Mother"; and the shah of Iran and a Chinese dragon adorn the cheeks. Glowing with pride, I showed the sublime spoof to Op-Ed editor Charlotte Curtis. She turned up her nose.

"That's awful!" she sneered. "It's kinder to Kissinger than the Pfaff text," I ventured. Curtis fixed me in an arctic stare, her normally fluttering eyelids immobile. Then she squeezed her lids tight as I struggled to salvage the drawing: "I'll try to negotiate a middragon crop." "That's not it," she snapped before pronouncing, bafflingly: "It's the excessive midsection flesh." "But publishing this drawing will be a real coup," I argued. "It's a cheap shot," she decreed with withering finality. Curtis then spun around in her chair. Her turned back closed the matter. Still clutching the condemned picture, I felt like it and I were insects caught in flight, only to be pinned to a wall of slain specimens.

Levine's satire was so clever that even the man portrayed might have been amused. "The only thing worse than being in it," Kissinger once said of Garry Trudeau's syndicated comic



1 David Levine

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strip, *Doonesbury*, "would be not to be in it."[1] And this was just after Trudeau had called Kissinger a war criminal.

Having failed to meet *Times* standards, all I could do was apologize profusely to the artist. "Send it back" came his icy reply. I returned Levine's original and told the bookkeeper to send him a check for full publication rather than the half-price "kill" fee. That wasn't the end of the story, however.

The cover of the *Village Voice* soon featured a detail of the drawing above the headline "Too Cheeky for the 'Times.'"[2] The article, according to its author ID, was written by "Matthew Levine, who works at *Time* [and] is David Levine's son." Matthew's account, alongside an enlarged reproduction of the full image of Kissinger, quoted his father: "I told her to tell her editors never, ever, ever, ever to contact me again." (That the elder Levine recanted this dire threat is clear; you'll soon see his later caricature of Saddam Hussein, which was published to even greater controversy.)

"The 'Times' knew what they were getting into," the article continued, "when they hired Levine," since two of his "caricatures, of [Richard] Nixon and [former New York mayor] Koch, were rejected due to the strength of statement in each."[3] This assertion paints the paper as a monolithic body whose actions arise from a single, omniscient brain. Yet I knew nothing about the earlier rejections, which had occurred before I arrived at the *Times*. That said, as a representative of the paper, albeit a recent hire, I was responsible for the Kissinger debacle.

The chief editors of *Times* sections, however, cannot make mistakes. As guardians of the *Times* brand, they're expected to uphold the paper's ideals. Editors are justified in scrutinizing the art for anything that could offend, since it's they who'll get called on the carpet. Seasoned artists are savvy about such matters. The veteran Levine, having experienced two rebuffs, was on intimate terms with *Times* policies. He later wrote to me, "I expected exactly what transpired by the *New York Times*."[4] Artists, we should note, are tremendously invested in their works and hate to see a strong example languish; drawings rejected by one client thus may be offered later to another.

This incident pointed up the disparate standards for word and image. No matter how savage or defamatory the text, the art—with its greater power to provoke right-brain reactions—must hold back. The episode also sounded an alert regarding the downside of working in the belly of the media beast. Prominent figures cannot be satirized in the *Times* any more than grenades can be joked about at an airport baggage check.

Levine's spurned masterpiece highlighted my ignorance about the caution that must be exercised when representing America's newspaper of record—especially when treating a figure like Kissinger, with his inevitable connections to *Times* brass. I vowed to learn the ropes. In the process, I discovered the intriguing tale of how the Op-Ed page and its groundbreaking art came about.

Upheaval

It's well known that the artist is a magician.
Then why is he set free to express himself with
impunity in the *New York Times*?

ROLAND TOPOR

Why, indeed, did the staid, canonical *Times* suddenly offer both writers and artists unprecedented freedom? This gift of sovereignty was tendered on September 21, 1970, when the paper unveiled an exhilarating vista. The obituaries vanished from the penultimate page of section A. In their place, a novel organism appeared, sprouting plums by three nonstaffers: a foreign affairs adviser to President Johnson, a contributing editor to the *New Republic*, and a Chinese novelist. The seed for this novel crop had been sown twelve years earlier. Alternately nurtured and neglected by the *Times*, uprooted, and cut back, it was finally planted in the terra firma of hot type.

This autumn day was the inauguration of "Op-Ed," the world's first newspaper page written—except for two staff columns—by readers. By creating Op-Ed, the *Times* anticipated the structural media change expressed in the explosive blogosphere of today's Internet: the shift of content from top-down to consumer-supplied. What's more, the new concept embraced a newspaper secret: many people turn first to letters to the editor. Now everyone was welcome to climb on a much larger soapbox to offer perspectives on the day's hottest topics, perspectives that would often be, as an opening-day editorial expected, "completely divergent" from those of the *Times*.[5]

Not only did Op-Ed's nonstaff bylines shatter tradition, but its pictures were revolutionary. Unlike anything ever seen in a newspaper, their backstory is compelling. Before exploring their origins, here's a sample of the pictures that would earn the epithet "Op-Ed art."

In 1972, Murray Tinkelman's ironic fantasy mocked the decision by the United States to bomb Indochina, thereby creating the world's mightiest air war to date [figure 2]. And in 1975, James Grashow's woodcut depicted the penitentiary system as analyzed by French philosopher Michel Foucault [figure 3]. Prisons succeed, claimed Foucault, at exactly what we expect of them: they recruit and train a lawbreaking group that the ruling class controls.

These pictures reveal that illustrations can do more than break up gray text or decorate it narratively. They can be vessels of meaning that enhance right-brain experience by altering mood, jump-starting imagination, or swaying interpretation. This is what Op-Ed art did, and it was startling.

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2 Murray Tinkelman

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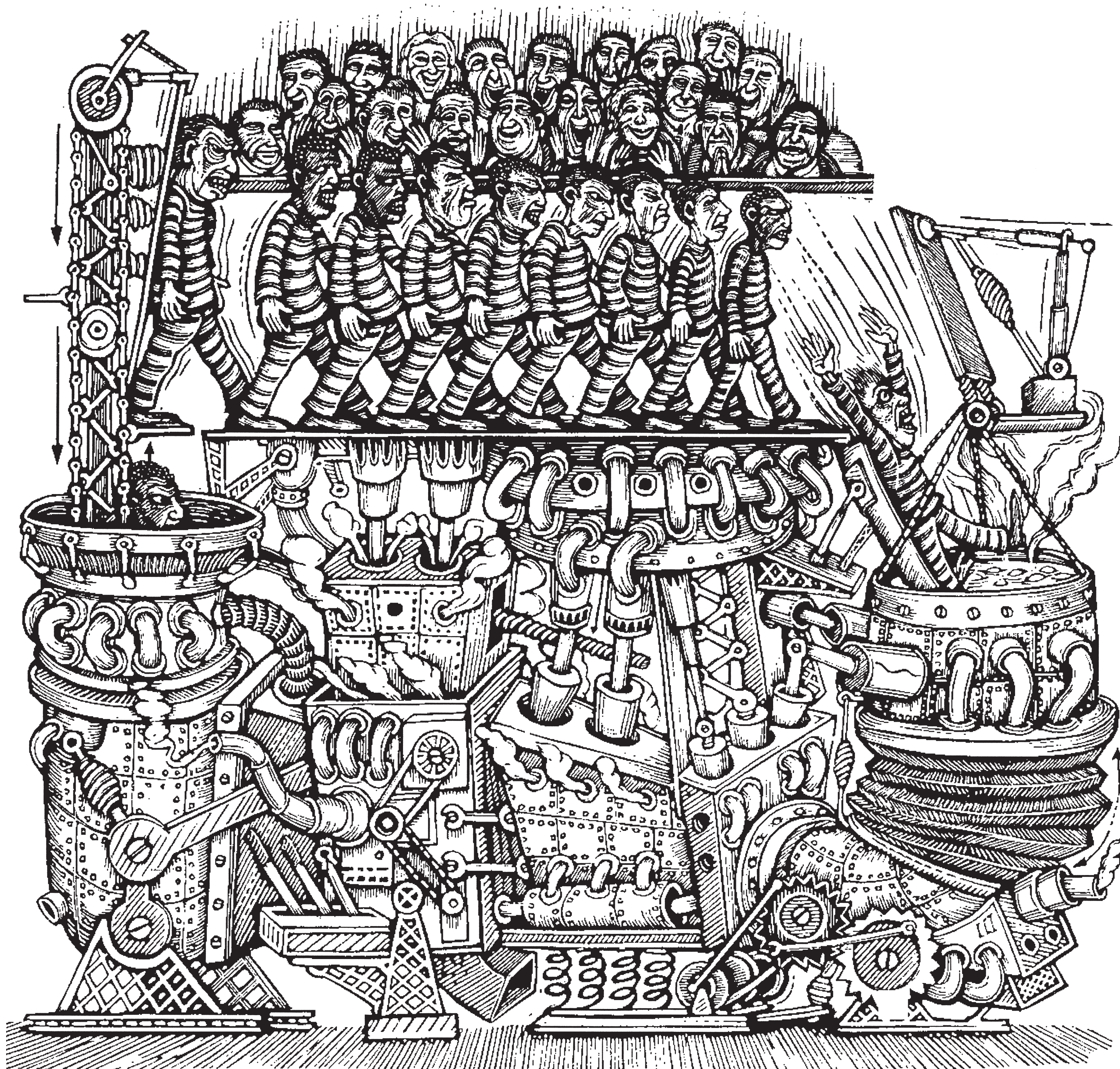

3 James Grashow

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Unfit to Print

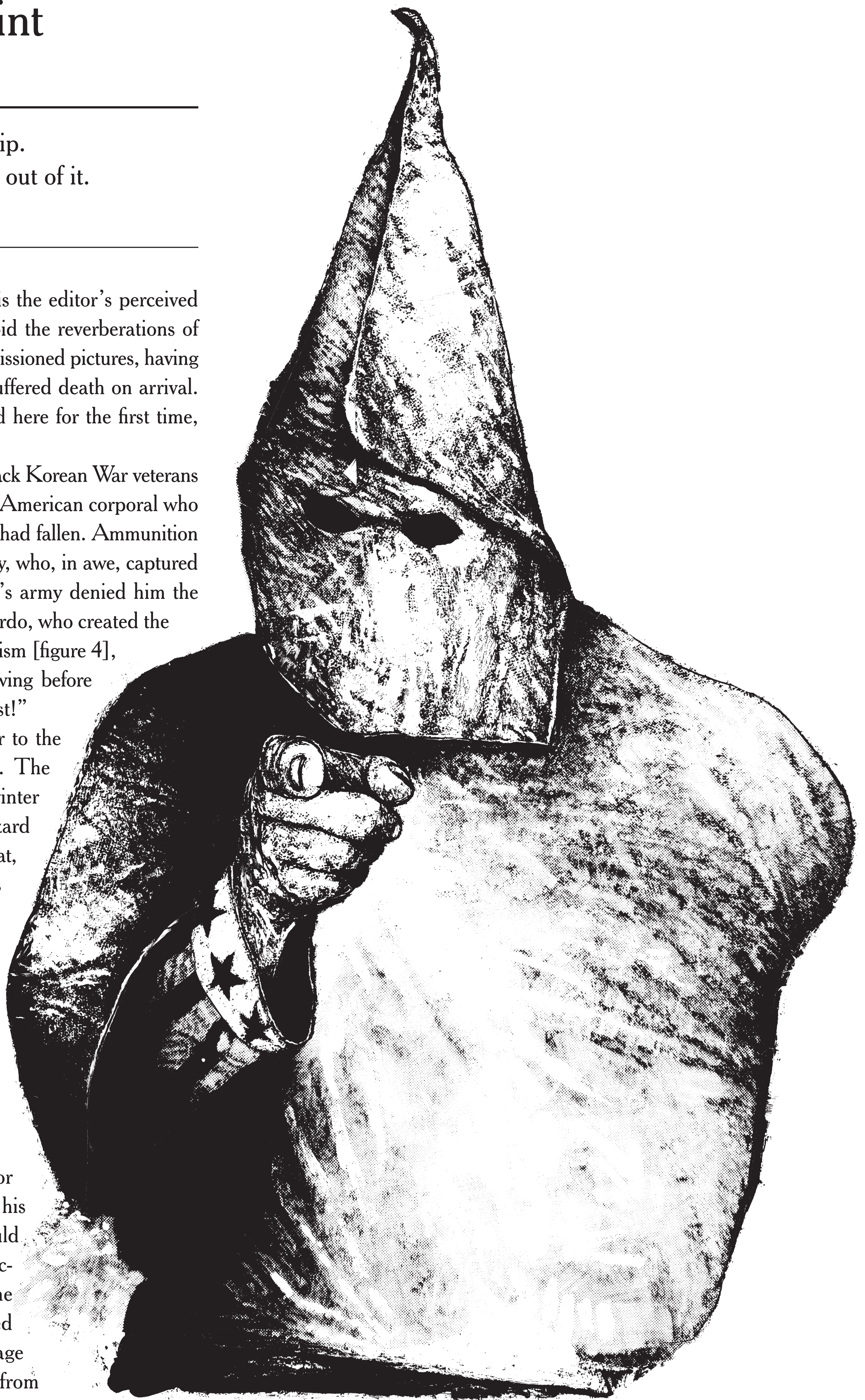
I believe in censorship.
After all, I made a fortune out of it.
MAE WEST

A corollary to the power of visual imagery is the editor's perceived need to curb that power, to predict and avoid the reverberations of any open-ended implications. Scores of commissioned pictures, having thus failed to meet *Times* standards, have suffered death on arrival. Many of these aborted images are published here for the first time, including this foretaste.

In 1983, a manuscript on the neglect of black Korean War veterans recounted the courage of one heroic African American corporal who stood alone on a hill after his entire company had fallen. Ammunition exhausted, he bravely flung rocks at the enemy, who, in awe, captured rather than killed him. Yet his own country's army denied him the Congressional Medal of Honor. Horacio Cardo, who created the perfect embodiment of the army's flagrant racism [figure 4], remembers how the editor assessed his drawing before killing it: "We can't picture the army as racist!"

In 1996, Cathy Hull illustrated a letter to the editor on historical meteorology [figure 5]. The letter writer pointed out that the mildest winter in sixteen years had preceded the fierce blizzard of 1888. Hull cleverly drew a thermometer that, despite reading 70 degrees Fahrenheit, was covered with ice and surrounded by falling snow. Her little scene was realistic, with the thermometer and its calibrations faithfully reproduced, and the Letters editor easily approved it. Why, then—in the last seconds before the page closed—was this innocuous, two-inch-square drawing summarily killed? The verdict from editorial page editor Howell Raines was "It's an ejaculation."

This little picture proved evocative for Raines, propelling him to create imagery of his own and triggering his fear that readers would construct the same image. Ironically, the picture treated the safest possible topic—the weather. Its presence—a type blurb replaced it—would have added to the letter's message the subtle emotional sensations that we get from climate changes.



4 Horacio Cardo

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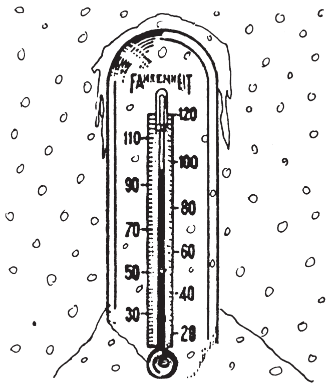
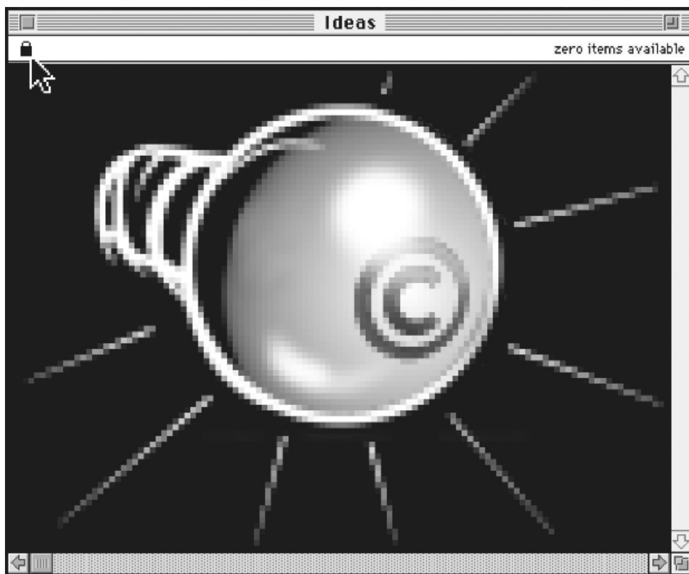


5 Cathy Hull

6 Ronald Searle



7 Nancy Stahl

Another category consists of pictures that faced serious editorial challenges yet managed to squeak into print by a whisker. Ronald Searle's ingenious drawing in which a finicky feline passes up suitors of her own sort bearing proper bouquets in favor of a raggedy, fish-proffering rat was pronounced politically incorrect [figure 6]. "It implies," said an editor, "that ladies love outlaws." Only after extended deliberation was Searle's confection cleared to run on Valentine's Day 1989.

In 1996, Nancy Stahl's digital wit interpreted a text that proposed that all Internet content be free [figure 7]. Every intellectual property claim, went the argument, is a chunk taken out of the public domain. The image of a copyrighted idea glowing on a locked computer window seemed perfect, and the Op-Ed editor endorsed it. It was thus astonishing to hear the editorial page editor say, "We can't publish a bare breast and a nipple!" This picture would, eventually, narrowly prevail, but the editor's interpretation provided grounds for celebration. When images are disputed, the improper "parts," as editors term them, are generally male. Now a whole new area of controversy was opening up!