

**Pop Will Eat Itself:  
Culture Jamming and the Battle Over Corporate Media Control**

By

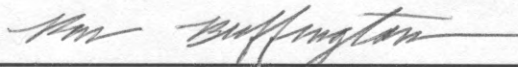
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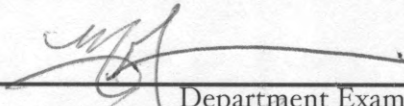
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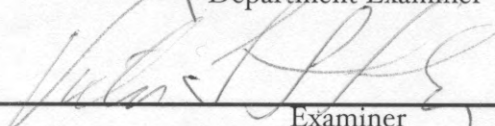
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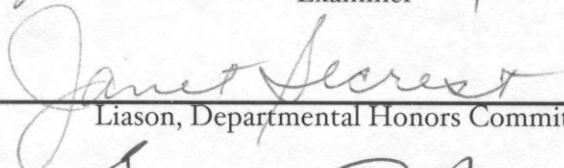
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*"We cannot simply draw the line between low and high, or between the inside and the outside of a culture, or between the public and private experiences of mass media. The line must also be drawn across them, through them: linking the two sides of the divide while separating them, canceling the opposition while marking it."*

-Ellen Lupton

*Low and High: Design in Everyday Life  
Writing on Graphic Design*

## **Introduction**

In San Francisco, thousands of football fans returning from a 49ers game look at a Camel Billboard on Bayshore Boulevard to see a skull glowing over Joe Camel's face with the words "Am I dead yet?" in brilliant red neon. Upon the arrival of three thousand of the world's top designers in Las Vegas for the eighth annual AIGA conference, the attendees are met with a billboard that consists of appropriated advertisements with the copy by the late design celebrity Tibor Kalman: "Stay away from corporations that want you to lie for them." At a downtown storefront on Market St. in Chattanooga, a poster is displayed that graphically criticizes GW Bush's educational policies, with a comic called "McSchools." In Israel posters for the International Buy Nothing Day appear all over the main shopping districts. In a low income New York neighborhood in broad daylight, an art director at an advertising firm rips paper off a cigarette billboard and in replacement of the fun-loving image he removed, paints a haunting depiction of a child. At official Coke Day at Greenbriar High School in Evans, Georgia, a student ditches the mandatory Coca-Cola t-shirt for a Pepsi shirt. In June 2002, ExxonMobil is so threatened by the Esso logo parodies on the Greenpeace website that they launch an enormous lawsuit against the

organization. In retaliation, Greenpeace launches a counter-attack by sponsoring Esso logo-busting contests.<sup>1</sup>

All over the world, graphic agitation is becoming a presence on our streets, on the internet, and in our homes. With its voice becoming louder and more volatile, one should search for a broader meaning to all of its varied manifestations and agendas. Is there an overarching ideological basis for these actions, or are similarities in style and content just coincidental? What are the aims of these diverse activists and what means do they find appropriate for their expression? Finally, can this movement make systemic change in an image-based society?

### **The Movement: Urban Resistance**

Before embarking on an exploration of the culture jamming phenomenon, one might question the relevance of such a study to the graphic designer. In an article called Design Anarchy, Kalle Lasn, the charismatic leader of the movement, states that “Designers are to the information age what scientists were to the age of reason. Whether designers acknowledge it or not, their profession is one of the key sites of struggle over the production and distribution of meaning.”<sup>2</sup> In an image-obsessed society, the designers who produce and conceive images have the tools at their disposal to wield power. It is how

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<sup>1</sup> [www.stopesso.org](http://www.stopesso.org) (18 Oct. 02).

<sup>2</sup> Kalle Lasn, “Design Anarchy,” Adbusters online, May 2002 [www.adbusters.org](http://www.adbusters.org) (13 Jun 02).

that power is used and what ideals it promotes that concern the designer and impact society as a whole.

At the millennium, there was a certain hunger for priority- defining statements within the field of design. There was a rash of manifestos that evaluated the present status of design and made a prescription for where it should or could be. To differing degrees all addressed the designer's hesitance to use his or her skills to make products more seductive, more marketable.<sup>3</sup> The most widely distributed and debated manifesto was by far the self-proclaimed First Things First Manifesto 2000, a re-write of Ken Garland's 1969 manifesto that warned against using one's visual communication skills as an instrument of capitalism. The First Things First Manifesto 2000 states that

commercial work has always paid the bills, but many graphic designers have now let it become, in large measure, what graphic designers do. This, in turn, is how the world perceives design. The profession's time and energy is used up manufacturing demand for things that are inessential at best... We proposed a reversal of priorities in favor of more useful, lasting and democratic forms of communication- a mind shift away from product marketing and towards the exploration and production of a new kind of meaning. The scope of the debate is shrinking; it must expand. Consumerism is running uncontested; it must be challenged by other perspectives expressed, in part, through the visual languages and resources of design.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Rick Poyner, "First Things First Manifesto 2000: A Brief History," *Adbusters* online, Fall 1999 [www.adbusters.org/campaign/first/toolbox/history.html](http://www.adbusters.org/campaign/first/toolbox/history.html) (13 Jun 02).

<sup>4</sup> "First Things First 2000," Innovation and Design for Information Empowerment, Fall 1999 <http://idie.net/ftf2000-1964.html> (20 Aug 02).

This allegiance amongst the signers of First Things First to explore design's non-commercial potential sparked a heated debate regarding the social responsibility of designers. At Kalle Lasn's urgence, the manifesto was published in his magazine *Adbusters*, the culture jammer's "journal of the mental environment," and on the accompanying website. Eight other major publications worldwide published it as well, and it was disseminated on the internet. It was originally signed by thirty well-known design figures and has to date thousands of signatories.

Not everyone rushed to sign the document. One reader of *Émigré* magazine, which also published the manifesto, writes, "To hold designers culpable for social and economic forces is laughable. The mistake that is all too often made by politically concerned designers is to equate social and political problems with design solutions, when in fact only design problems have design solutions."<sup>5</sup>

Others disagreed with the close association that is made between design and advertising in the manifesto. And still more designers oppose making any value judgments as to what is a "better" way to utilize a designer's talents. *I.D.* magazine published the manifesto with ten critical footnotes by Michael Beirut, in which he responds, "What is our design canon but a record of how messages about humble things like shoes, fountain pens, rubber flooring, booze and cigars have been transformed by designers like Bernhard, Lissitzsky, Zwart, Cassandre, and

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<sup>5</sup> Nico MacDonald and Kevin McCullah, "Designing is not a Political Act," *Émigré* No. 52 (Fall 1999) 6-7.

Rand? What makes dog-biscuit packaging an unworthy subject of our attention, as opposed to, say, a Walker Art Center catalogue? Don't dachshund owners deserve some measure of beauty, wit, and intelligence in their lives, too?"<sup>6</sup>

The publishing of *First Things First* has sparked a dialogue about what role design should play in society, which is exactly what the writers of the manifesto urged. The document became a vehicle for democratic expression- one of the main tenets of culture jamming. In design classes everywhere students debated the manifesto in seminars and professionals sent e-mails and letters to the publishing bodies. The American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) held discussion groups in which the manifesto was deliberated. The document gained the attention of all facets of the design world, and the debate continues.

In addition to the conceptual impact culture jamming has contributed to the field of design, the movement is pioneering a distinct visual style of rebellion that is infiltrating the design world. The use of strong graphical statements like negation and detournment, both of which will be discussed later in detail, can be seen in any design annual. Many design students subscribe to *Adbusters* magazine and emulate its style, and designers like Stefan Sagmeister have become famous for the use of hand-written text over images that look not unlike a jammed billboard. In short, the movement has impacted the design world aesthetically and ideologically, a feat which merits serious academic study.

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Beirut, "A Manifesto." *I.D Magazine* (April 2000) 77.

## **Enron: Rand's Fallen Idol**

In June of 2002 Americans who turned on the television to watch the news undoubtedly saw images of the outside of the Enron headquarters with its gleaming logo rendered in steel. The symbol, created by Paul Rand, who many consider to be the world's most famous and successful designer, now stood for something entirely different than Rand had anticipated. The logo that was once praised as a symbol of power and energy now stands for corporate corruption.

The evolution of the meaning of the Enron symbol is enough to make a designer pause and think about himself as a meaning maker. If in fact, as Lasn suggests, the designer is such a crucial part of society because it is he or she creates meaning, the fate of the Enron symbol is enough to dishearten one holding fast to that belief. Sure, a designer might contribute, but it is ultimately the policies of the company and its advertising that shapes meaning. Although situations such as these are unavoidable, documents like *First Things First* argue that designers must concern themselves with the institutions that their designs are promoting.

Culture jamming seeks to reverse this hierarchical relationship of meaning-making. Instead of allowing for meaning to be dictated from the corporation down, it aims for meaning to move from the people up. Mark Dery, writer of what has become the culture jammer's manifesto, states that "the desperate project of reconstructing meaning, or at least reclaiming that notion from marketing

departments and P.R. firms, requires visually-literate ghostbusters.”<sup>7</sup> Those “ghostbusters” are culture jammers.

The term culture jamming itself implies interruption and alteration. The term was coined in 1984 by the college band Negativland to describe billboard alteration and other forms of media sabotage. The word "Jamming" is appropriated from the CB slang for illegally interrupting radio broadcasts with fart noises, obscene statements, and other disruptive gestures.<sup>8</sup> Now the word is used to describe the graphic or auditory sabotage of any form of media that brings about a shift in meaning, usually with an anti-corporation slant.

Perhaps the best summary of who culture jammers are and what they seek to achieve can be found in the Culture Jammer's Network statement. It proclaims:

We are a loose global network of artists, activists, writers, students, educators and entrepreneurs who want to launch the new social activist movement for the information age. Our aim is to topple existing power structures and forge a major shift in the way we will live in the twenty-first century. We believe culture jamming will become to our era what civil rights was to the 60's, what feminism was to the 70's, what environmental activism was to the 80's. It will alter the way we live and think. It will change the way information flows, the way institutions wield power, the way TV stations are run, the way the food, fashion, automobile, sports, music, and culture industries set

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<sup>7</sup> Mark Dery, *Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing, and Sniping in the Empire of Signs*. Westfield, NJ: Open Magazine Pamphlet Series, 1993.

<sup>8</sup> Dery

their agendas. Above all, it will change the way we interact with the mass media and the way meaning is produced in our society.<sup>9</sup>

This statement exudes the vastness of the culture jammer's aims and the loftiness of their goals. Although most culture jamming organizations have a specific social or political cause they seek to promote, there is an incredibly broad cross section of people who use culture jamming tactics. This includes right wing Christians dismayed at obscene TV programming, African- Americans trying to reclaim their neighborhoods from tobacco and alcohol ads, and Socialists who seek to disseminate their socio-political values. Some culture jammers seek to bring about the downfall of the car, so they aim at attacking car ads. Other groups like the Barbie Liberation Front target toy giant Mattel's most popular and profitable doll as the brunt of their jams to draw attention to gender issues.<sup>10</sup> All jammers, however, aim to make a good jam or "subvertisement," which Naomi Klein deftly describes as "an x-ray into the subconscious of a campaign, uncovering not an opposite meaning but the deeper truth hiding beneath the layers of advertising euphemisms."<sup>11</sup> Despite the sometimes conflicting political and social agendas of each respective group, the main tenet that holds true for all culture jammers is that free speech can never truly exist until the

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<sup>9</sup> "Culture Jammer's Network Statement." *Adbusters* online, [www.adbusters.org/information/foundation](http://www.adbusters.org/information/foundation) (04 May 02).

<sup>10</sup> Branwyn, Gareth. *Jamming the Media: A Citizen's Guide*. (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1997) 248-9.

<sup>11</sup> Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (NY: Picador, 1999) 281-2.

individual has as much right (and as much space) as corporations have to express themselves.<sup>12</sup>

### **Ideology: The New “Situation”**

An analysis of Kalle Lasn’s writings and organizations is appropriate for a study of the most concurred culture jamming ideology. Lasn is generally regarded as the spearhead of the movement because he created Adbusters Magazine, the Powershift Advertising Agency, and wrote *Culture Jam*, the book-length manifesto for jammers. However, it is important to note the ways in which other jammers’ ideology differs from Lasn’s.

Lasn places culture jamming within a continuum of activism- from Dadaists, Surrealists, Feminists, punk-rockers, and most significantly, Situationism.<sup>13</sup> In the preface of *Culture Jam*, Lasn dedicates the book to his great teacher Guy Debord, the prominent writer of the Situationist International. It is clear from reading his handbook that culture jamming seeks to pick up where Situationism left off. Lasn says he hopes his book functions as a Situationist-inspired detournment- a perspective-jarring turnabout in your every-day life.<sup>14</sup>

It is apparent that a basic understanding of Situationist ideology is crucial to understanding the foundations of culture jamming as understood by Lasn. In *Society*

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<sup>12</sup> Klein, 284.

<sup>13</sup> Kalle Lasn, *Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America* (NY :Quill Books, Harper Collins, 1999) 99.

<sup>14</sup> Lasn, *Culture Jam*, xvii

*of the Spectacle*, Debord lays the conceptual framework within which culture jamming works. Debord states that we live in a “spectacle,” which he defines as a capitalistic society that controls the masses through images dictated by the media. These images produce mediated human desires. The spectacle creates and controls these desires through the production of commodities and manipulation of spectacles that create a false impression of fulfillment.<sup>15</sup> For example, the spectacle causes people yearn for commodities like weight-loss products or spray-on hair in order to align one’s body image to that which is portrayed as most desirable in magazines and on television, ultimately in a vain attempt to fulfill an abstract desire like love or acceptance. Although the media promises that these products will result in the realization of these desires, Debord argues that the spectacle can never yield the guaranteed satisfaction because it creates a complex web of mediation that never allows humans to experience or fulfill innate, unmediated human desires. The result of the spectacle is that all social interaction is inevitably mediated by images.<sup>16</sup> In short, as Debord states, “All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.”<sup>17</sup>

The Situationists staged “situations” or “happenings” in order to disseminate Debord’s ideas. These situations usually involved disrupting some sort of media

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<sup>15</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: MIT Press, 1995) 23.

<sup>16</sup> Karen Elliot, “Situationism in a Nutshell” *Barbelith Zine*, June 2001 [www.barbelith.com/cgi-bin/articles/00000011.shtml](http://www.barbelith.com/cgi-bin/articles/00000011.shtml) (Oct 99).

<sup>17</sup> Debord, 37.

function and/or mocking consumerism. At the International Assembly Of Art Critics in Belgium in 1967, the Situationists interrupted the conference by barging in and handing out offensive flyers. They used the same tactic to disrupt a Charlie Chaplin press conference. At the first exhibition of the Situationist International's "Industrial Painting" in Turin in 1958, Situationists flung paint in the style of abstract expressionism onto giant rolls of canvas, and then sold the paintings by the yard to the public in retail shops.<sup>18</sup>

The Situationist disgust for the mediation and unbridled consumerism of modern society culminated in a 1968 revolt. The student union at Strasbourg University asked the Situationist International to write a critique of student life that would then be distributed to students at the beginning of the school year. The pamphlet was entitled "On the Poverty of Student Life" and called for a student revolt due to the overcrowding and under-funding of the University system. When the pamphlet was published the University waged a high-profile lawsuit against the student union, ironically resulting in more publicity for the pamphlet than it may have otherwise garnered. "On the Poverty of Student Life" was then distributed to the University of Nanterre, where the students staged a strike and revolted in the streets. The revolt spread to Sorbonne, where officials closed the University. Students flooded the streets of Paris along with governmental and corporate workers who also went on strike. President Charles deGaulle feared a coup as most of French society

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<sup>18</sup> Elliot

shut down. The strike eventually subsided to an anti-climactic end when the Situationists, split by ideological differences, disbanded.<sup>19</sup>

However, the Situationist influence left a profound impact on philosophy, the visual arts, and media theory. Culture jamming theory considers society to be in a state similar to Debord's spectacle, where we are controlled by media-dictated images that spark desire and make false promises. Now images are commissioned by mega-corporations, manufactured by ad agencies, and relayed to the public in every form of media. It is the power that these corporations wield and what they do with it that culture jammers seek to overthrow.

Culture jammers are also influenced by the techniques the Situationists employed. Undoubtedly, the most important technique that the Situationists used in this regard is detournment, which has been used by scores of culture jammers as well as famous artists like Robert Rauschenburg and Barbara Kruger. Detournment is a technique in which an image, word, or phrase is appropriated and recontextualized in a way that changes the original meaning. Debord states, "Detournment is the antithesis of quotation, of a theoretical authority invariably tainted if only because it has become quotable, because now it is a fragment torn away from its context, from its own movement, and ultimately from the overall frame of reference of its period and from the precise option that it constituted within that framework."<sup>20</sup> Considering

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<sup>19</sup> Irving Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1996) 69.

<sup>20</sup> Debord, 145-6.

that the goal of culture jammers is to retake the control of images and meaning - making away from corporations, detournment seems a natural choice.

Debord endorses the use of plagiarism as a tactic to use against the spectacle, which culture jammers also embrace. He states, “plagiarism is necessary. Progress demands it. Staying close to an author’s phrasing, plagiarism exploits his expressions, erases false ideas, replaces them with correct ideas.”<sup>21</sup> Debord’s ideas on plagiarism are the foundation for culture jammers’ fight for more liberal intellectual property rights. The band Negativland has engaged in intellectual property battles by naming their 1986 album “U2,” after the popular band of the same name, provoking a legal battle with U2’s record company, Island Records. Throughout the course of litigation, Negativland sought to highlight the absurdity of the idea that Island Records could own the letter/number combination that forms the name U2. Negativland pursued more litigation with the Pepsi Corporation with their 1997 record of re-appropriated soda commercials named *DisPepsi*. For legal reasons, Negativland was not permitted to display the title on the cover of *Dispepsi*, so the liner notes referred fans to their “word-of-mouth” phone line to reveal the title.<sup>22</sup> With the expansive ownership of language that is protected increasingly by copyright law, and aggressive legal maneuvers by corporations to sue anyone who uses their language in an unsatisfactory way, jammers see Debord’s statement as prophetic.

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<sup>21</sup> Debord, 145

<sup>22</sup> “Intellectual Property Fights,” *Negativland* online resource [www.negativland.com/intprop.html](http://www.negativland.com/intprop.html) (03 Jul 02).



Additionally, Debord's emphasis on altering meaning through context plays a crucial role in many jams. By using the words already existing on advertisements, changing the accompanying image, or changing one crucial word of the ad, the meaning can be dramatically shifted. Lasn uses jujitsu as a metaphor to describe a revealing shift of meaning that is achieved by using Debord's theories on language. He states, "In one simple deft move you slap the giant on its back. We use the momentum (and the language) of the enemy."<sup>23</sup> Thus, linguistics based jams tend to exploit the most vulnerable word or letter in order to force a conceptual shift.

In addition to Debord's influence, one can't help but notice the reiteration of Romantic ideas, particularly the beliefs of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in the writings of Lasn. Lasn restates Rousseau's classic plea that man needs to reconnect with nature by avoiding the allures of modern society. He urges the reader to be at peace with the natural world by spending more time with nature and less time watching TV. Lasn notes how the media imitates instinctual survival reactions in order to get our attention. In the TV industry, a "jolt" is a sudden camera movement that creates tension, raises blood pressure, and demands the viewer's vigilance. Anyone who has

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<sup>23</sup> Klein, 281

seen MTV or an action movie has seen such a jolt and experienced the effects. According to Lasn, when people channel surf they are merely searching for a jolt. The In nature, the purpose of this instinct was to prevent one from being eaten by wild animals, but now it is used as a tool to produce higher TV ratings.<sup>24</sup> Instead of the activity associated with the physical and chemical state these instincts cause, the viewer sits lethargically in front of the screen. In an ironic twist of Rousseau's view that man innately needs to connect with nature, media manipulates human instinct in order to engage spectators in a moneymaking scheme.

Another connection to be forged with Rousseau is in the culture jammers' similar critique of modernist economics. Rousseau was one of the first philosophers to mount an internal critique of capitalism, questioning in 1750, "what will become of virtue if wealth must be acquired at any cost? Ancient philosophers were always speaking of morals and virtue; ours speak only of commerce and money...They evaluate men like herds of cattle. According to them, a man's worth to the state is only that of what he consumes..."<sup>25</sup> Lasn wages the same argument today, complaining that our modern capitalist system has resulted in moral degradation. He cites disregard for the environment and the lack of a sense of a community as byproducts of capitalists' focus on consumption. Whereas Rousseau believed that Romantic ideals could rescue modern capitalist economics from collapsing into bourgeois selfishness, Lasn sees the same problem today but believes that the solution

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<sup>24</sup> Lasn, *Culture Jam*, 15

<sup>25</sup> Lowell Blair, *The Essential Rousseau* (New York: Plume Books, 1974) 218.

lies outside capitalism. Lasn's economic stance is undoubtedly socialist, but many culture jammers, as Rousseau does, only feel the need to wage an internal critique of capitalist principals.

It is perhaps important to note how Lasn incorporates other media theory into his ideology. Douglas Rushkoff's *Media Virus!* is particularly relevant to Lasn's discourse on memes, information that replicates itself by passing from person to person. The premise of *Media Virus!* is that media is a living organism which propels itself like a virus. A media virus can be anything from a scientific theory, a jingle, a musical riff, a pop star or an image- anything that is able to catch the public's attention. It will flow through the landscape of popular culture and latch on to whatever it can. Once attached, the virus can inject more hidden agendas into the datastream in the form of ideological code-not genes, but a conceptual equivalent called memes.<sup>26</sup> If a media virus infects one person, it will infect those around him, and spread from there. Lasn concludes that the controller of memes is the one with the power to control what ideas get disseminated. Thus the culture jammers aim to regain the control of images and airways from media conglomerates.

## **Development**

While the importance of Situationism, Romanticism, and Media theory is crucial to culture jamming ideology, one would be remiss not to chart out events, legislation, and cultural phenomena that have prompted the organization and

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<sup>26</sup> Douglas Rushkoff, *Media Virus!* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1996) 14.

popularization of the contemporary culture jamming movement. Within only the past five years culture jamming has gained unprecedented worldwide appeal and has organized international campaigns such as “Buy Nothing Day” and “TV Turnoff Week.” The Oregon County Fair even offers a culture jam camp for kids. This passage seeks to explain why this movement has steadily gained cross-generational popularity by tracing political, economic, and cultural developments.

Kalle Lasn cites the 1886 Supreme Court decision in the case of Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad as a crucial turning point in history that has led to the corporate corruption that culture jammers seek to fight against. In this dispute over a railroad route, the Supreme Court ruled that private corporations are “natural persons” under the Constitution and therefore entitled to free speech and other liberties under the Bill of Rights. Lasn argues that since corporations are entities that have far more money and power than individuals, they can more aggressively exercise and defend their rights legally than any individual. Therefore, Lasn cites this legal decision as the paramount moment in which corporations gained more rights and powers than the people who work for them.<sup>27</sup> This, he believes, is the precursor to the modern-day tyrannical mega-conglomerate and the catalyst for the culture jamming movement.

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<sup>27</sup> Lasn, *Culture Jam*, 68



But it wasn't until the Depression era, with tension and resentment towards corporations mounting, that the first organized culture jamming began. Citizens were appalled by idyllic depictions of happy, robust people enjoying commodities on billboards and signs while millions were starving and scraping to get by. The context of these ads made them even more insulting, as most were displayed outside dilapidated houses and storefronts. Consequently, ads became the preferred medium for expressing discontent with the current economic situation. Some organizations mounted campaigns to write socio-political messages over signs or dismantle them completely. A socialist magazine called *The Ballyhoo*, which contained political articles and jammed advertisements, became a roaring success with subvertisements for products like the "Lady Pepperal Bedsheet Deluxe" with extra long sheets to fit the dimensions of a park bench.<sup>28</sup>

When the depression ended with the advent of World War II, so did most of the adusting. The post-war boom led America into a state of affluence, and confidence in the economic system rose accordingly. But with affluence came big

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<sup>28</sup> Klein, 305

corporate budgets for advertising, resulting in the employment of ever more intrusive means to reach a growing pool of consumers. In contrast to the 30's adusting movement that was caused by poverty, an abundance of wealth and the willingness to spend was the catalyst of the modern culture jamming movement.

This post-war affluence led to growing budgets for the development of new technology which, in turn, created new media. The ad industry utilized new technologies in printing, telecommunications, television, film, and eventually computers in order to reach each company's desired audience. These technological innovations and large advertising budgets led to mailed advertisements, television commercials, telemarketing, tri-vision billboards, taxi-cab top advertising, and internet pop-up ads. As these forms of advertising yielded satisfactory results, companies and agencies tried to up the ante by completely covering entire buses, buildings, subways, and even police cars in advertisements. With several companies vying to be the first to project their logo on the moon, it is understandable that culture jamming would appeal to individuals who find this expanding colonialism disturbing.

This advertising colonialism has sparked a form of pre-emptive jamming. A trend has started among upscale communities like Hilton Head, South Carolina who, not needing the profit or wanting the visual distraction, have acted to immunize themselves from ads by passing legislation that limits the size, height and frequency of advertisements.<sup>29</sup> The concern for the effect of billboards on a community's

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<sup>29</sup> Nick Rockel, "Billboards Get Freedom of Speech" *Adbusters* online, September 2002 [www.adbusters.org](http://www.adbusters.org) (09 Sep 02).

citizens has expanded to urban areas like LA. Upon passing legislation in 2003 that bans the construction of any new billboard structures, LA Mayor Jim Hahn stated that “For years billboards have distracted our commuters, increased visual blight in our neighborhoods, and diminished the market value of houses in communities where billboards exist. Today, we are committing to stopping that kind of blight from reducing the quality of life in our neighborhoods.”<sup>30</sup> Jammers see the passing of this sort of legislation as a defensive jam that brings public attention to the legitimacy of their cause.



Another legislative trend that has influenced the rise in popularity of culture jamming has been the cutting of federal and state education budgets. When this trend started in the 70's, corporate budgets simultaneously exploded. Schools welcomed generous donations from corporations despite whatever exclusive contract may have been entailed in order to compensate for the money lost in budget cuts. Quietly, corporations targeted schools as the new frontier of branding, establishing

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<sup>30</sup>Mason Stockstill, “LA’s City Wide Billboard Ban is Leaky” Adbusters online, January 10, 2003 [www.adbusters.org/breakingnews/la\\_billboards2003\\_01\\_09.html](http://www.adbusters.org/breakingnews/la_billboards2003_01_09.html) (12 Jan 03).

McDonalds food in the cafeteria, Dell computers in the lab, Nike uniforms and shoes for the athletic teams, and Coke machines in the hallways.<sup>31</sup> Contractually, school administrators were required to not only encourage but force students to pledge allegiance to these brands in school by requiring students to wear Coca-Cola t-shirts or wear only Nike paraphernalia with athletic uniforms. Corporations like Channel One offer low income schools free audio/visual equipment on the condition that students be forced to watch their daily 12-minute show which consisted of teen news with product placements and advertising directed at teens.<sup>32</sup> Despite the fact that these developments aren't necessarily healthy or educational for students, schools continued to sign these exclusive contracts to compensate for inadequate government funding. Students and teachers who realize how these corporations are educating impressionable students to be loyal consumers to products that promote poor health habits and/or unethical production and business practices have found something to fight against. It is becoming an increasingly popular practice now at college campuses for students to replace and/or detourn advertisements on the back of bathroom stalls, to sabotage Coke machines, or boycott the bookstore for carrying sweatshop-produced college team merchandise. At Prince George Secondary School in British Columbia, students produced posters asking "Who really owns PGSS?" after the Vice Principal told parents they should always make sure their children have

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<sup>31</sup> Carolyn McCarron, "Your Education is Brought To You by Our Sponsors: Advertising, Marketing, and Corporate Sponsorship in America's Public Schools." *Design Issues* (NY: Allworth Press, 2001) 27-28.

<sup>32</sup> McCarron, 30

money to buy sodas from the Pepsi vending machines daily.<sup>33</sup> While concerned parents are joining organizations for commercial-free schools, students have chosen to protest their commercial education by using culture jamming tactics.

In short, the history of the development of culture jamming can be charted by the history of the loss of democracy in modern institutions, the increasing role that corporations now play in education and in other areas, and the ever-present way in which advertising mediates everyday life. It is these developments that have given culture jammers something to fight against, and paradoxically given them the means by which to fight.

### **Means: Detournment, Parody, Pranks, and Paint.**

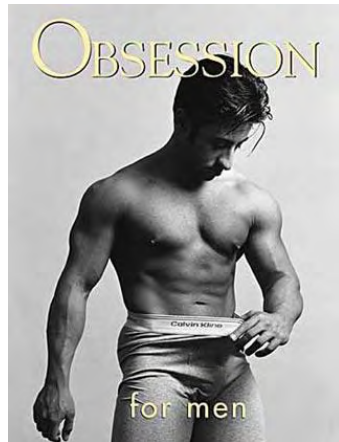
It is important to note the ways in which culture jammers seek to reclaim the control of images and meaning-making, because, interestingly, they borrow the techniques of that which they are fighting against. As aforementioned, there are several different approaches that are typically used to make subvertisements. However, there is one approach that is used universally: resist media with media.

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<sup>33</sup> Eli Speigelman, "Students Stay Unincorporated" *Adbusters* online, Winter 1999 [www.adbusters.org/campaigns/commercialfree/toolbox/unincorporated.html](http://www.adbusters.org/campaigns/commercialfree/toolbox/unincorporated.html) (09 Sep 02).



Culture jamming uses a variety of powerful graphic techniques, such as marking over, detournment, and parody. Before embarking on an analysis of how these techniques alter meaning, it is appropriate to analyze the role that both language and humor play in the making of a good jam. Mark Dery calls the way in which culture jammers use language “guerilla semiotics.” This analytical technique seeks to decipher meaning and then make some change in the language that reveals a conceptual shift. One example of this is a jammed George W. Bush campaign billboard. By simply blocking out all the letters of “Bush” except “BS,” the sign now reads, “Blueprint for the Future- BS.” One important distinction that should be made with language-based jams is that their success many times relies on the viewer having a sense of what the ad originally stood for. In this particular jam, it is obvious that the billboard once read, “Blueprint for the Future- Bush/Cheney.” This jam, like many other language-based jams, relies on the residue of the original to convey its subversiveness.



With regard to humor, perhaps Mark Dery put it most succinctly when he wrote “Culture jammers are Groucho Marxists, ever mindful of the fun to be had in the joyful demolition of oppressive ideologies.”<sup>34</sup> By adding humor to the formula, jammers find it easier to catch the public’s attention. However, most of the time jammers don’t want their jams to be dismissed as silly, meaningless pranks.

Accordingly, good jams walk a fine line between the humor of the image or word and the oppressive quality of what it originally stood for. Like satire, it is the tension between the funny and serious nature of the critique that many times makes the jam ever more profound.

One cannot ignore the importance of graphics in an effective jam. Many jammers have developed systematic formulas for a good jam, many of which differ from each other only in terms of how they are graphically executed. Some groups, like San Francisco’s Billboard Liberation Front, employ the knowledge of technicians to implement such complex plans as rewiring neon signs and sabotaging 48-foot wide

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<sup>34</sup> Dery

billboards that stand over 100 (ft) high. Some jammers prefer to produce their own original subvertisements. One popular group that does this in the art world is the Guerilla Girls, whose posters aim to point out the chauvinism of the art world. Other jammers prefer to mimic the seamless, airbrushed feel of real advertisements. Such jams seek legitimacy by copying the “look” of other ads. In contrast, some other jammers think the only way to receive the public’s attention with a subvertisement is to mark over existing ads. This less technical approach requires nothing more than spray paint and wheat paste, and is therefore the most accessible for jammers who have limited resources. In all, these acts of sabotage vary from being highly technological to anti-technological, from scathingly political to what seems to be little more than a high-school prank. However, these varied techniques contribute to a distinctive style that culture jammers use to reclaim authority from the original image-makers.



A technique that merits analysis is “sniping.” A snipe is an outdoor advertising term that refers to printed material (usually vinyl) that is strategically placed over an existing ad. Snipes allow the advertisers to save money by adding or concealing information on the billboard without having to pay for reprinting and re-

installation. Culture jammers use snipes in a similar way- to delete or add either words or images to a billboard in order to change the meaning. The picture shows above documents jammers in the act of altering a McDonald's billboard by adding a snipe that says "bloated" over the word "hungry." Jammers who use snipes find the most defenseless element of the billboard and exploit it in order to change meaning.



The championed advertising tactic of branding has also been used by jammers to thwart ad campaigns that cost millions. Phil Knight, CEO of Nike, is credited with developing the wildly successful "brands, not products" marketing strategy, which focuses not on the quality of the product but the lifestyle with which the product is associated. This strategy encourages companies to cut production costs in order to spend millions on ad campaigns that seek to define, for example, the way of life of the Nike athlete. This strategy relies heavily on the company's logo, which functions as the graphic foundation on which the brand is constructed.<sup>35</sup> The logo is prominently used in ads that exemplify the lifestyle and philosophy of the kind of people who purchase the brand. But it is this emphasis on the logo that makes it so particularly fragile, and so intriguingly corruptible by culture jammers. Nike has

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<sup>35</sup> DK Holland, "Keeping Promises: The Impact of Brands on Society/Part One" *Design Issues* (NY: Allworth Press, 2001) 3-11.

spent millions in public relations trying to recover from the aftermath of culture jamming campaigns targeted against the swoosh symbol. ([www.nikesweatshop.com](http://www.nikesweatshop.com)) By displaying slogans and jammed swooshes from the International Anti-Nike Movement like “Just Don’t” and “The Swooshtika” on everything from billboards to athletic stadiums to clothing, culture jammers have found logos to be the corporate Achilles heel.<sup>36</sup>



Another interesting approach to reclaiming ad space is the elimination of all images or messages by either ripping ads down or painting over them. There is a campaign from the Adbusters Media Foundation called “Reclaiming Urban Space” that encourages people to cover existing ads in their neighborhood with white paint. The aim of this campaign is to make the streets a blank canvas for expression. Similarly, in an article called, “Do-It -Yourself Billboard Banditry,” Adbusters.org gives step-by-step instructions on how to reclaim your own billboard. The process involves using a type of spray paint that converts the surface of the advertisement to a chalkboard on which anyone can write. In some ways, this approach could be

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<sup>36</sup> Klein, 366.

considered the most democratic in that it leaves the ad as a clean slate for public discourse.

Although the techniques and means that culture jammers employ are diverse, the results are conceptually and aesthetically unified. All of these techniques seek to reclaim power and authority from the ad agency or corporation that created the message, and all result in a conceptual shift in meaning. With the exception of the group of jammers who imitate the smooth, airbrushed feel of real advertisements, most subvertisements have a raw and primitive look as a result of using readily available materials like paint and wheat paste.

Interestingly, this style is gaining popularity in the design world as advertisements that imitate the style of subvertisements are winning awards in the advertising industry. Although both might consider their relationship to be parasitic, the ad industry and culture jammers actually share an odd symbiotic relationship. Jammers rely on the techniques of advertisements to make an effective subvertisement, while the ad industry has capitalized on the anti-ad hipness culture jamming promotes. Perhaps the embodiment of this dichotomy is the person who works as advertising executive by day, jammer by night. Culture jamming has active recruitment techniques which appeal to professionals who work in the industry in order to persuade them to use their talents for a “greater” cause. This is how the Adbusters Media Foundation is able to produce such creative, seamless professional quality subvertisements and Organizations like San Francisco’s Billboard Liberation Front are able to rewire electronic signs at enormous heights. While the difference

between the look of a subvertisement and the look of an advertisement is narrowing, so is the gap between the person who produces advertisements by day and the person who defaces them by night.

**Goals: Bring the Image Factory to a Shuddering Halt.**

Culture jamming's aims are at best euphoric and at worst naïve. Lasn calls the culture jamming effect the "unswoothing of America." He states, "We will jam its image factory until the day it comes to a sudden, shuddering halt. And then on the ruins of the old consumer culture, we will build a new one with a noncommercial heart and soul."<sup>37</sup> Where the Situationists failed, he sees opportunity. However, the details of this new non-consumer consumer culture are in many ways disconcerting and contradictory.

By reclaiming the control of images from corporations and placing them into the hands of citizens, culture jammers hope to invoke a more democratic world. In a post corporate culture, Lasn believes that people would engage in free, unmediated dialogue and uphold democratic ideas. The streets would become a clean slate for public discourse. Families would spend more time interacting instead of watching TV. People would go to spiritual centers instead of the mall on Sunday. The obsession with fashion trends would end. Kids would play on playgrounds instead of playstations. The bike would replace the car. We would all live in a utopian

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<sup>37</sup> Lasn, *Culture Jam*, xvi.

individualistic yet communitarian society, which embraces the pioneering individual spirit while somehow making people less selfish and more concerned about the community.

Lasn's goals and the way his organizations seek to reach them have been subject to a considerable amount of critique, even from loyal culture jammers. An important analysis of the goals of the culture jamming movement is that they operate under the assumption that the masses are ignorant and blatantly unaware of advertising schemes. Does the general public need someone to paint a skull over a model's head in order for us to realize she is dangerously emaciated? *Adbusters* magazine has gone under fire for the patronizing way in which it seeks to point out the obvious. Naomi Klein states that, "At times, *Adbusters* feels like only a slightly hipper version of a public service announcement about saying no to peer pressure or remembering to reduce, reuse, and recycle. The magazine is capable of lacerating wit, but its attacks on nicotine, alcohol, and fast-food joints can be repetitive and obvious. Jams that change Absolut Vodka to "Absolut Hangover" or Ultra Kool Cigarettes to "Utter Fool" cigarettes are enough to turn off would-be supporters who see the magazine as crossing a fine line between information-age civil disobedience and puritanical finger-waving."<sup>38</sup> Even Mark Dery, a former contributor to the magazine and writer of the culture jammer's manifesto, finds this aspect of Lasn's ideology

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<sup>38</sup> Klein, 293.

condescending to the general public, who are treated as if they are unable to “police their own desires.”<sup>39</sup>

But the effect of a great subvertisement is far more complex than just a trite statement on say, the dangerous consequences of showing an emaciated model as desirable. One of the successes of subvertisements is that they force the public to realize that ads aren't just the visual equivalent of white noise. Because we are exposed to a plethora of ads every day, it is easy to dismiss them as a benign part of our reality. After seeing a “skulled” model on the Gap billboard you drive by every day on your way to work, you might realize how completely normal you once thought it looked. Then you look at the surrounding ads and realize they all show emaciated models. Whether you notice them as they are absorbed or not, these images mediate our personal relationships. Therefore, a good subvertisement can say much more than just the socio-political statement that is its primary layer of meaning; like a media virus, it contains a germ that can infect the images around it, pointing out the manipulative role they serve in daily life.



**Solid Gold Buy Nothing Day Dancers  
of MainDance – Vancouver, Canada**

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<sup>39</sup> Personal interview with Naomi Klein. Klein, 294.

Despite the loftiness and improbability of Lasn's aims for the culture jamming movement, Lasn is able to include elements of smaller, more immediate goals that remain attractive to many jammers. For example, Lasn predicts the downfall of the car and the deconstruction of the auto industry as a whole, and urges his followers to be car-free. Except for those who live in metropolitan areas with sufficient public transit, this is almost impossible for the majority of Lasn's audience. What most jammers are willing to do is to walk or ride a bike when possible, buy the most fuel-efficient car, and carpool. Lasn encourages these alternatives in campaigns such as "Car-free Day," which promote more viable answers to his overarching goal. These more realistic solutions contribute to the overall goal of preserving the environment and fall within the limits of what most people are able and willing to do to help. Although it is unlikely that his goals will ever be fully realized to his vision, Lasn's Adbusters.org and Powershift Media Agency have been successful at developing, promoting, and pulling off dozens of campaigns a year that contribute to his greater aims. This is how Lasn has ingeniously continued to propel his movement despite his improbable goals.

### **Re-reappropriation: Pop will Eat Itself.**

Considering the Culture Jamming Movement's goals, ideology, and history, it is revealing to analyze its present status and develop a prediction for the future. Has the movement changed the way meaning is distributed? Is there any possible way

Lasn could see his goals come to fruition? How and under what conditions could culture jamming be successful based on Situationist ideology?

Observations of how the ad industry has reacted to the movement offers revealing information. Since the boom of culture jamming, ad agencies have fought back using their adversary's tactics. The current trend in the ad industry is to make subvertisement- like advertisements, a movement pioneered by the ad agency Wieden & Kennedy.<sup>40</sup> After the success of their 1994 Nike print and TV campaign that looks distinctly un-commercial, other campaigns followed suit like Sprite's "Obey your Thirst" that borrow from the anti-commercial coolness of culture jamming. Other slogans and catch phrases like "Sometimes you've just gotta break the rules" by Burger King were released in droves, and soon ads with a decidedly subvertisement feel were flooding the airwaves.<sup>41</sup> Corporations like Nike, MSN, and AT&T have recently started campaigns that employ the use of "corporate graffiti," in which their ads are spray painted or adhered over existing advertisements in urban spaces.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps even more ironic, the "corporate flag jam" from an *Adbusters* print campaign was shown in the August 2002 issue of *Intersection* magazine draped over the latest Ferrari model with the caption, "The Adbusters flag jam can make your car 10 times sexier." In an even more scathing touché, Weiden & Kennedy asked Negativland, the

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<sup>40</sup> "History" [www.wk.com](http://www.wk.com) (03 Dec 02).

<sup>41</sup> Rick Poynor, "A Manifesto: Disobey the Giant" Urban Art Institute Lecture Series (Chattanooga, TN: 17 May 00).

<sup>42</sup> Aliya Sternstein, "Graffiti Taglines" *Forbes.com*, November 2002 [www.forbes.com/2002/11/12/cz\\_as\\_1111graffiti.html](http://www.forbes.com/2002/11/12/cz_as_1111graffiti.html) (03 Dec 02).

antiestablishment band who conceived the term “culture jamming,” to do a soundtrack for the new Miller Genuine Draft commercial.<sup>43</sup> Instead of taking a hit from jammed ads and subvertisements, the ad industry re-reappropriated the style and principles of culture jamming into award-winning multi-million dollar campaigns.

Taking into account Guy Debord’s theory on the spectacle, this re-appropriation isn’t surprising. As Situationist scholar Karen Elliot writes

As people consume the commodities or image-objects of the spectacle they become part of the spectacle, making rebellion against it hard. Even the most radical gesture gets recuperated into the spectacle and turned into a commodity, negating its subversive meaning. It is a question not of elaborating the spectacle of refusal, but rather of refusing the spectacle. Everything becomes a commodity in the spectacle, even TV, radio, the internet, books, ideas, thoughts and desires. Rebellion is sold back to us as an image that pacifies us.<sup>44</sup>

Considering that a religion, political stance, or any philosophy that aims to grow in opposition or retake the mainstream has to latch on to mainstream cultural values to grow and gain more supporters, Elliot’s comments on the spectacle make sense. As a movement grows, it gets appropriated into the mainstream spectacle, the more paradoxical it then becomes regarding its original intent. Hence culture jammers go to Barnes and Noble to buy their latest copy of *Adbusters*.

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<sup>43</sup> Klein, 289.

<sup>44</sup> Elliot



This commodification of rebellion is recounted in an *Adbusters* article called “The Devolution of an Image.”<sup>45</sup> The article reports how an image of a protester at the G-5 summit is appropriated and used in a series of Earthlink ads. In the visual transformation, certain details like the dollar sign on the protestor’s toboggan are strategically eliminated to downplay the fact that the image was originally anti-corporation. Ironically, *Adbusters* recognizes the commodification of the movement as alarming but divorced from any flaws in culture jamming ideology.

Perhaps the greater question regarding the commodification of the culture jamming phenomenon is whether or not it means the movement is a failure. This question can be answered by considering whose definition of failure is taken into account. In light of Lasn’s lofty goals for the movement, it would be easy to dismiss the culture jamming phenomenon as a failure because it has not and most probably cannot completely dismantle corporate culture as it predicts. Certainly, the corporations and ad agencies would point to the monetary success and widespread distribution of their subvertisement-like campaigns as proof that they ultimately are the ones who have the power

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<sup>45</sup> “The Devolution of an Image” *Adbusters* No. 52 (Fall 2002) 42.

to create and distribute meaning. Jammers would point to the millions of dollars in public relations damage their subvertisements have caused, or the growing anti-corporation sentiment after the fall of Enron and Worldcom as symptoms of their success. These arguments, however, don't consider the whole picture.

Design critic and writer Ellen Lupton states that, "In order to renew their critical view of contemporary life, designers must find a place to speak within culture, and not position themselves outside and above it."<sup>46</sup>

Similarly, it is how culture jamming functions when appropriated into the mainstream culture that provides an intriguing challenge to the establishment. The state of the culture jamming movement proves that even the most radical, subversive subculture can be appropriated into the mainstream, but not without altering the culture it sought to oppose. Culture jamming has altered the values of advertising, capitalism, industry, pop culture, labor practices, and the justice system all while questioning the notions of free speech, representation, and democracy. In the process of becoming a part of the establishment, culture jamming has brought elements of irony, contradiction, and complexity to the once bland, patronizing images that mediate our daily lives. It proves that at least for one brief moment, an individual can reverse the hierarchical structure of meaning-making, topple the authority of multi-

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<sup>46</sup> Ellen Lupton, "Low and High" *Writing on Graphic Design* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996) 57.

million dollar corporations, and ultimately contribute to the ever-morphing, ever-appropriating cycle of mainstream culture.

## **Epilogue**

The research and ideas expressed throughout the body of this paper culminated in a creative project in which I sought to explore my own socio-political ideas using culture jamming tactics. The project took the form of sniping magazines for several reasons. Magazines are an accessible form of print media, which is the area of design I am most trained in. Unlike other ideas for the project, the altering of magazines was something that was economical and accessible. Additionally, I found it intriguing that magazines in a coffee shop/bookstore walk the line between being private and public media. For these reasons, I chose to alter magazines at a local Barnes & Noble bookstore and then place them back on the newsstand to be sold to their respective demographic.

I used the sniping technique to alter the magazines because it allowed me to conceal or add information, therefore enabling me to make a conceptual shift in one deft move. The snipe was produced by printing on an adhesive that could then be cut out and quickly adhered to the magazine. I believe the snipe functions best in this body of work when, like a media virus, it infects the ads before and after it. Therefore, the jammed ad in each magazine is not confined to a spread; rather, it

provides an alternative perspective from which the reader could consider the contents of the rest of the magazine. In this context, the snipe could both conceal and reveal.

The magazines were chosen with several different considerations. I wanted to choose five magazines that combined covered a wide demographic- old and young, male and female, mainstream and alternative. The jam executed in each conveyed a deeper layer of truth behind the tactics the advertisers employ in order to seduce the reader into buying jeans, a car, diamonds, or an ideology. Each snipe was also meant to lay bare the crude assumptions the advertisers (or in the case of *Adbusters*, the editor) made about their audience, and, in turn, lead the reader to realize how the desire these ads spark can never be fulfilled by their consumption. Hence, Martha Stewart Living readers saw an anti-SUV jam, and GQ's audience was exposed to a jam that poked fun at an overtly sexual and blatantly phallic Chrysler ad. I jammed the Diesel Jeans ad because Diesel is one of the companies that has re-reappropriated the cool culture jam look to sell their sweatshop- produced jeans. That ad was also chosen because it was in Teen Vogue and exposed young readers to offensive representations of expected gender roles. DeBeers was the brunt of a jam in British Vogue because I wanted to comment on the bloody, corrupt diamond cartels DeBeers (and some hypothesize the British Government) promotes in Sierra Leone. Finally, jamming *Adbusters* gave me a unique opportunity to comment on the commodification and hypocrisy of the culture jamming movement to an audience which supports Lasn's values.

Throughout the process of executing this project, I came to several realizations. The more refined the snipes were formally, the more complex the message seemed to become. In all of the magazines, the snipes were so formally connected to the original ad that the reader might at first have questioned if the magazine had been tampered with. They relied on the subtlety of a color shift or, in the case of *Adbusters*, the tangibility of the snipe in order to signify to the audience that the publication had in fact been altered. I found that this subtlety contributed to the overall seamlessness and insidiousness of each design.

After researching the cycle of appropriation by culture jammers and re-reappropriation by advertisers, I don't view my sniping of magazines as an end, but rather as a part of this cycle. I could easily see someone coming after me placing their snipes on top of mine, or an adman who just happened to buy a jammed version of *Gentelman's Quarterly* going to his firm the next day with a brilliant idea for a new campaign. Therefore, I considered the creative component of my project to be not a conclusion, but a part of the process of altering and contributing to the cycle of mainstream culture.

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