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GRAPHIC DESIGN / GRAPHIC DISSENT: TOWARDS A CULTURAL ECONOMY OF AN INSULAR PROFESSION

A Dissertation Presented

by

MATTHEW A. SOAR

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

September 2002

Communication

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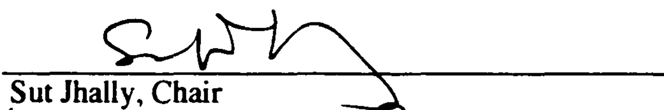

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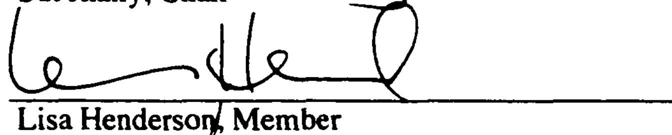

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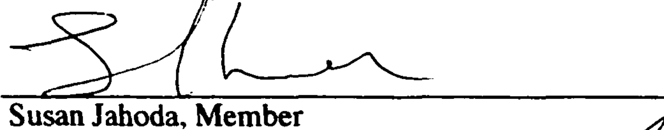

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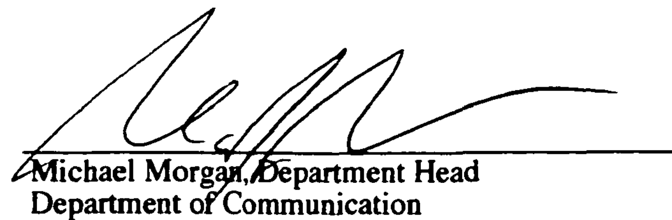

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DEDICATION

To Jen, Kate and Max with love and affection.

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I'd like to acknowledge the support and generosity of Sut Jhally throughout my years at UMass, and to those exceptional individuals with whom I've had the privilege of working. In no specific order, then: UMass faculty, particularly Lisa Henderson, Kathy Peiss, Justin Lewis, Carolyn Anderson and Briankle Chang; and, fellow grad students James Allen and Susan Ericsson. Thanks also to Paul du Gay of the Open University for taking an interest in my work, and for inviting me to participate in a Workshop on Cultural Economy held in January 2000 at the OU (du Gay & Pryke 2002; Nixon 2002). I also owe a debt of gratitude to all of the interviewees who agreed to speak with me, and the individuals who went out of their way to facilitate my explorations of the graphic design profession. I'd like to single out Steven Heller and Andrea Codrington in particular, for encouraging me to write about graphic design and graphic designers for the AIGA's journal, and thereby easing my access to this fascinating milieu. Finally, thanks to my students at Hampshire College, especially those who took my course HACU 293 *The Design of Dissent* in the Spring of 2002, for their ideas and enthusiasm, and for responding positively as I attempted to craft a course out of a work in progress.

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ABSTRACT

GRAPHIC DESIGN / GRAPHIC DISSENT:
TOWARDS A CULTURAL ECONOMY
OF AN INSULAR PROFESSION

SEPTEMBER 2002

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This dissertation is an exploration of the realm of cultural production associated with graphic design. Graphic design is a ubiquitous, yet largely invisible, professional practice that nevertheless contributes substantially to the make-up of our visual culture. Drawing on emergent strands of enquiry associated with critical cultural studies and especially with ethnographic approaches to the study of cultural production, *Graphic Design/Graphic Dissent* investigates the ideological limits to agency of graphic designers by focusing on calls for greater social responsibility emanating from within this milieu.

It begins by drawing on Richard Johnson's model of the circuit of culture (Johnson 1986/87), a conceptual schema intended to represent the production and reproduction of meanings and values within culture. A modification of this model - called the "short circuit" - is proposed as a way to account more fully for the rarefied habitus (Bourdieu 1984) associated with the cultural intermediaries. Graphic designers, then, like ad creatives (Soar 1996; 2000a), fashion designers (McRobbie 1998), and radio (Henderson 1999) and television (Dornfeld 1998) producers, embody a series of contradictory impulses, which are both institutional and subjective.

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Graphic Design/Graphic Dissent also reviews the body of critical, historical, and journalistic writing emanating from within graphic design culture, evaluating it for both its advancements and limitations; a key strand of debate within this discourse relates to the politics of feminism and professional practice. Chief among the graphic design interventions explored here are: culture jamming and *Adbusters* magazine; and, the First Things First Manifesto 2000 (a formal call for greater social and professional responsibility among designers). Also discussed are the following groups and individuals: Gran Fury, Queer Nation, RTMark, Women's Design and Research Unit (WD+RU), We Interrupt the Programme, Jan van Toorn and Sheila Levrant de Bretteville. It is ultimately argued that a formal distinction must be made between the notions of "politics" associated with high-profile, even spectacular, interventions, and those relating to more modest, local, and marginal initiatives.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS v

ABSTRACT vi

LIST OF FIGURES xi

CHAPTER

1. WHY STUDY COMMERCIAL CULTURAL PRODUCTION? 1

A Model: The Circuit of Culture 3

On Semiotics 5

Beyond Dead Authors: Advertising and Design as Cultural Production 7

The "Children of Marx and Coca-Cola": A Brief History of the Cultural Intermediaries 10

From Commercial Artists to Cultural Intermediaries 13

The Short Circuit 14

Conclusion 17

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: GRAPHIC DESIGN & CULTURAL THEORY 19

Introduction 19

What is Graphic Design? 20

On the Emergence of Critical Voices within the Design Community 23

The Look of Critical Writing 24

The Emergence of Graphic Design Criticism 26

In Summary 27

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Critical Scholarship on Visual Culture and Graphic Design 27

Critical Sociologies of Art 27

Histories of Art in the Service of Commerce.. 29

Sociological Perspectives on Graphic Design 32

Theories of Cultural Production.. 36

So why hasn't this research been done already?: Further obstacles........ 38

In Summary: The Potential for a Cultural Economy of Graphic Design............ 39

3. LIFE INSIDE THE SHORT CIRCUIT: GRAPHIC DESIGN'S HABITUS...... 41

Introduction: Design/Work/Lifestyle 41

Habitus and Graphic Design 42

'Essential Ambiguities': Sustaining the Short Circuit and Protecting the Habitus 45

A General Outline of the Habitus 46

Education, Professionalism, Taste 50

Design Culture: From Ritual Journalism to Scholarly Debate 53

The Fate of Theory in the Habitus of Graphic Design............................ 59

Graphic Design History and Criticism in the Service of Design Practice 62

Feminist Challenges to the Habitus of Graphic Design.......................... 64

Messing Things Up 65

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4. THE HABITUS AND THE SPECTACLE OF DISSENT 70

Introduction 70

First Things First? 71

The Usual Suspects: Interviews with Intermediaries about First Things First ... 73

Relative Sinners: Intermediaries on Advertising vs. Design 80

Fall-out from First Things First 83

The Lasn-Dixon Line: Intermediaries as Revolutionaries 86

The Politics of Culture Jamming 90

Conclusions 91

5. 'SMALL IDEAS': DISSENT BEYOND THE HABITUS 94

Introduction 94

A Qualification 96

Design-oriented Interventions: A Brief Survey 97

Marlene McCarty and Gran Fury 100

Queer Nation 102

RTMark 104

"Inside the Form" 105

Critical Voices in Education: van Toorn; de Bretteville 105

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WD+RU 107
We Interrupt the Programme 110

Intermediaries as 'Producerly' Audiences: Notes Towards a New Analysis..... 111
Negotiation and Opposition in the Creation of the Graphic Design Text 115
Discussion 117

6. TOWARDS A CULTURAL ECONOMY OF GRAPHIC DESIGN 118

Introduction 118
Towards a Cultural Economy of Graphic Design 121
When is an Intervention not an Intervention? 122
Notes Towards Future Research 125

REFERENCES 133

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LIST OF FIGURES

Figure | Page

1. The circuit of culture (after Johnson 1986/87) 128

2. The short circuit 129

3. The First Things First Manifesto 2000 130

4. A poster ascribed to the designer "Ernst Bettler" (Wilson 2000) 131

5. "Less noise" by Josef Müller-Brockmann (Meggs 1998a, p. 329) 132

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CHAPTER 1

WHY STUDY COMMERCIAL CULTURAL PRODUCTION?

> Obviously people invent and produce adverts, but apart from the fact that they are unknown and faceless, the ad in any case does not claim to speak for them, it is not their speech. (Williamson, 1978, p. 14)

> Stripping away the veil of anonymity and mystery would by itself be of great value in demystifying the images that parade before our lives and through which we conceptualize the world and our role within it. (Jhally, 1995, p. 86)

The quotations, above, are indicative of two opposing - and apparently incompatible - views about how to assess the cultural and political import of advertising. Whereas Sut Jhally advocates a line of inquiry that includes the production of "image-based culture" (1995, p. 77), Judith Williamson's influential argument is founded on the assertion that this is a futile strategy; that an informed analysis of the advertising text is the best way to advance our understanding of "one of the most important cultural factors moulding and reflecting our life today." (Williamson, 1978, p.11)

Of course, the issue of textual authorship - however broadly defined - is a familiar enough conundrum. Within the literature on the sociology of news, for example, Noam Chomsky has argued that "you could find that ninety-nine percent of the journalists are members of the Socialist Workers Party...and that in itself would prove nothing about the media's output" (Media Education Foundation, 1997). For Chomsky, the form and content of news would still be largely dependent on issues of ownership and control.

Based on the scholarly evidence available, then, the critical study of advertising has been overwhelmingly biased in favor of textual approaches; in contrast, the study of graphic design has been virtually non-existent. This may simply be a matter of priorities. At the limit, however, important questions remain unspoken (let alone unanswered). In this dissertation I argue not for a theory of authorship applicable to advertising and graphic design or even "image-based culture" *per se*; rather, I suggest

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that an appreciation of these commercial "culture[s] of production" (see du Gay, 1997), however inconsequential they may appear to our understanding of ideology, will strengthen the explanatory force of critical cultural inquiry, understood here as a holistic practice involving various points of entry, modes of analysis, and types of intervention.

I should also add that my aim is not merely to democratize our research agendas, perhaps adding commercial cultural production to the existing, prevalent concentration on the text and reception. I do not even maintain that these particular cultural workers hold the key to origination or ultimate authorial intention (although I do maintain that their role in the *design* process – even more so than advertising - is of primary importance). Instead, by working *against* the narrow approach advocated by Williamson, I hope to show the ways in which such workers embody some remarkable paradoxes. Not least of these is their primary attentiveness to an audience of peers, rather than a putative set of consumers-at-large. In this light, the additional notion that advertising and/or design are a homogeneous force - a "culture industry" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1973) – will no longer be tenable.

My guiding assertion is that commercial cultural production is the primary driving force of image-based culture; further, advertising and graphic design are the twin engines that make this possible. Since I have previously explored the role of advertising production (Soar, 1996, 2000a) with limited success, this dissertation is concerned, instead, with the professional culture of graphic design production. My specific reasons for this change in focus are laid out in this Introduction. (I use the term *commercial* cultural production to differentiate activities such as advertising and design from other activities more traditionally associated with the notion of cultural production: theater, dance, opera, film-making, etc..)

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A Model: The Circuit of Culture

In an interview published in 1986, Raymond Williams made the following statement:

> there needs to be developed many different kinds of analysis which are in touch with each other....the least developed...is that which tries to understand precisely the production of certain conventions and modes of communication right inside the form. I would put this at the top of the list not because it could answer all the questions on the table, but because it's the least likely thing to happen. (Williams, Heath, & Skirrow, 1986, p.14)

That same year Richard Johnson proposed, under the title *What is Cultural Studies Anyway?* (1986/87), a theoretical model called the "circuit of culture" (see also Hall 1997, du Gay *et al.* 1997). While not necessarily a comment on, or even a response to, Williams' statement, the circuit (see figure 1.) offers a way to bring together the "different kinds of analysis" to which Williams had alluded. Importantly, Johnson recognized that no single approach, and hence no single vantage point on his circuit, could in itself provide the kind of far-reaching analysis that, for him, constituted "cultural studies." As I hope to show, the circuit also happens to provide an excellent way of bringing to light those items on Williams' list that have, historically, been the "least likely to happen."

The model indicates that we must take account of all four moments identified by Johnson: production, the text, consumption, and, "lived cultures" and "social relations" more generally (Johnson, 1986/87, p. 47). I have already argued (Soar 1996, 2000a) that the study of advertising in particular has concentrated largely on its textual manifestations, and that scholarly attention to commercial cultural production has been significantly underdeveloped. As Williams suggests, then, attending to the "production of certain conventions and modes of communication" (Williams *et al.*, 1986, p.14) remains, for a variety of reasons, an under-explored, obscured, or even maligned strategy.

Stuart Hall's important article *Encoding/Decoding* (1980) may serve to highlight my basic point here: We have witnessed the emergence of audience research within

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cultural studies and associated concerns with the myriad issues of cultural reception - in short, "decoding." Hall's essay has been particularly influential in this respect, and yet the first half of his couplet (i.e. "encoding") cannot be said to have helped to foster a similarly fruitful line of inquiry, let alone a canon. My concern, then, has less to do with the institutional reasons for this bias (such as scholars' relative ease of access to ads versus ad executives, or the emergence of relatively cheap video recording and playback technologies). and more to do with the potential critical leverage afforded by attending to matters of *encoding* (i.e. cultural production; cultural producers) as opposed to *decoding* (the text; the audience).

A longstanding emphasis on issues concerning the text and its reception has led to the exploration of our amusements, preoccupations, fears, allegiances, and pleasures - that is, on meaning-making *outside the realm of work.* This has often been a purposeful and, indeed, fruitful strategy in scholarly research, but it has also lead, perhaps unconsciously, to a cumulative disregard for that sizeable, and formative, chunk of time most people devote to labor (which, I maintain, is no less *cultural* than any other aspect of our lives). Further, this activity is not necessarily outside the scope of cultural studies. Indeed, recent works of scholarship have begun to demonstrate the value of exploring these apparently unpromising arenas of research. On the advertising and design front, studies concerning the realm of production by Paul du Gay (1996, 1997), Sean Nixon (1997a, 1997b), Frank Mort (1996), and Marilyn Crafton Smith (1994), among others, have led the way in opening up important, heretofore neglected possibilities for fruitful cultural inquiry. Elsewhere, empirically oriented ethnographic studies have provided further encouragement, for example Henderson's extended field study of students and student work in a film school (Henderson 1990, 1995), Dornfeld's participatory research relating to the production of a documentary series for PBS (Dornfeld 1998), and McRobbie's very recent exploration of the world of British

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fashion design from the perspective of young designers emerging from art schools (McRobbie 1998, 2000).

This dissertation seeks to strengthen the least explored sections of the circuit, then, by focusing attention on the subjective aspects of commercial cultural production - and graphic design in particular. In the spirit of Johnson's intervention, I will base this on my own adaptation of the model, conceived to provide a better account of the activities of graphic designers. Ultimately, my argument is intended to apply to a whole range of workers[1], collectively identified by Pierre Bourdieu as the "new cultural intermediaries" (1984, p. 366). The task in hand, however, is not simply to "demystify...images" (to use Jhally's phrase), so much as to demystify the subjective dilemmas facing individuals who directly utilize their creative talents working under the star of late capitalism, and the resistive, transgressive, progressive, even *utopian,* impulses many of them also find the time to explore and express using these very same skills.

On Semiotics

> Auteurism is surely dead, but so are the debates over the death of the author. In the current climate, few people would doubt the value of asking: Who is writing? or Who is speaking? (Naremore, 1990, p. 20)

If we take them seriously - *collectively* - as a social and cultural phenomenon, advertisements, commercials and pieces of graphic design are a rich source of ideas, both about and for the world we inhabit (albeit habitually rarefied, heavily mediated, and often distorted). Leiss, Kline, & Jhally (1990) refer to ads and commercials collectively as "the privileged discourse for the circulation of messages and social cues about the interplay between persons and objects" (p. 50). Scholars of many persuasions have turned to ads to illuminate and develop their research. To illustrate: they have been

---

[1] A provisional list might include packaging, fashion, stage, set, industrial, and retail/window-display designers; fashion and style journalists; photographers; film and TV directors; screen-writers; illustrators; animators; model-makers; typographers; actors, models, and popular musicians; computer animators; and, web-page designers.

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classified historically (Lears, 1994; Leiss *et al.* 1990; Marchand, 1985); analyzed according to product category, such as cigarettes (Pollay, Lee, & Carter-Whitney, 1992), toys (Kline, 1993), jeans (Goldman, 1992), television (Spigel, 1991), cosmetics (Peiss, 1998), refrigerators (Isenstadt, 1998), or political valence (Myers, 1986); assessed for their underlying ideological or fetishistic inflexions (Ewen, 1988; Jhally, 1989); and scrutinized according to their specific portrayal of the family (Goffman, 1979); men (Katz, 1995; Wernick, 1991); women (Barthel, 1988; Clark, 1993; Goldman, 1992; Williamson, 1986); children (Seiter, 1995); and the "Other" (Kern-Foxworth, 1994; O'Barr, 1994)[2].

Judith Williamson's *Decoding Advertisements* (1978) is probably the best known and most referenced work on the signifying practices embedded in advertisements. Its text-based orthodoxy (and concurrent militantism against authorship) is informed by the work of Roland Barthes who, as a leading semiotician, warned against any attempt to account for the supposed intentions of the producers (authors) of any message (text). He asserted that "to try to find the 'sources', the 'influences' of a work, is to fall in with the myth of filiation" (1977, p. 160)[3]. As Leiss *et al.* (1990) explain: "From the outset, semiologists have concentrated on relationships among the parts of a message or communication system, for, they contend, it is only through the interaction of component parts that meaning is formed" (p. 198).

---

[2] I am aware of the danger of merely being reductive here. My intention, in compiling this list, is simply to show that it is most often advertising texts that are organized and analyzed in the pursuit and exploration of vital cultural and social issues, rather than the realm of ad production. The selection of the former as an avenue of research cannot be understood only as a matter of convenience, although this must surely be a latent factor, since I, too, have discovered that it is remarkably difficult to gain sustained and reliable access to advertising professionals.

[3] In an essay titled *What is an Author?* (Foucault 1981), Michel Foucault offers a more nuanced response to Barthes' polemical assertions: "we can say that in our culture, the name of an author is a variable that accompanies only certain texts to the exclusion of others." For example: "an anonymous poster attached to a wall may have a writer, but he cannot be an author." (Foucault 1981, p. 284)

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The danger is that, at the limit, such work "tend[s] to derive an 'account' of readership, in fact, from the critic's own textual readings" (Johnson 1986/87, p. 63). Perhaps the most important elision, however, is that by following the semiotician's logic, we are apparently unable to account for *change*: since any notion of putative authorship is ruled out-of-bounds, there is no credible way to explain, for example, how the strategies and content of advertising messages have developed over the last century.[4]

I am not arguing here against the *usefulness* of semiotics - far from it. Rather, I subscribe to the notion of a theoretical and methodological agnosticism[5] that, for example, recognizes the enormous analytic power of semiotics, but refuses the dogmatic overtures that have often attended it. To illustrate: Leiss *et al.* (1990) develop a method for ad analysis that combines semiotics with content analysis; apart from anything else, this provides a more accessible foothold for those attempting to follow or repeat the work. At one extreme, however, the danger always remains that, as Don Slater has suggested, "[s]uch theories are then used to ignore the actual social practice of advertising, implying instead that the ideological structure of language itself can account for the specific character of advertisements" (1989, p. 122).

<u>Beyond Dead Authors: Advertising and Design as Cultural Production</u>

In this section I draw on one of Stuart Hall's lesser known essays, which, properly speaking, belongs to the literature on the sociology of news. This well-established area of research provides a useful analogy for the study of commercial cultural production. *The Determinations of Newsphotographs* (Hall, 1972) is a dissection of the process of news production, with particular emphasis on the use of images. Informed by the work of Louis Althusser and Barthes, Hall's argument stresses

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[4] See, for example, the four historical stages identified by Leiss *et al.* (1990).

[5] I am indebted to Sut Jhally for this insight.

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both the ideological underpinnings of this site of (cultural) production, and, via semiotics, the already-inscribed nature of its output. In this compelling frame, the process of newsmaking is neither arbitrary nor purely denotative.

Hall's work can also be distinguished in other important ways. For example, Hall makes room for subjective influences; the possibility that the semi-formal culture of journalism might have *some* effect on news agendas, or at least on the way in which selected stories are framed. Hall refers, briefly, to what he calls the "social practices" or "relations" (p. 60) of news production. It is this part of his analysis which I would like to adapt for the purposes of understanding the processes of advertising and design production. To this end, it is suggested at the outset that medium- and large-sized design studios and ad agencies bear comparison with the archetypal newsroom that appears in Hall's essay. The analogy offered here is therefore partial, but no less informative.

The "'ritual practices' of news production" are "the actual routines by which the 'labour' of signification is ordered and regulated" (p. 61). These, in turn, are framed by a "routinized and habituated professional 'know-how'" (p. 61), by which Hall means "certain types of knowledge... which enable the signifying process to take place" (p. 61). The routines of news production are analogous to designers' and ad creatives' *craft*: their practical ability to produce copy (text), layouts (sketches of how an ad or piece of design might look), and to bring together the various service functions in order to produce them - be it the talents of illustrators, photographers or typographers. These activities are informed by a professional knowledge, a higher-order expertise which manifests itself in the way in which the various elements are combined. This is not, of course, merely a function of each designer's or ad creative's own whims, but a complex blend of constraints and influences[6]. This combination of practices - in sum, their

---

[6] This includes: knowledge of current trends in design and ad 'looks' (and those of films, and of magazines, etc.); an understanding, largely the result of experience, of how the design or ad concept will look once it appears as a poster or in a magazine or as a brochure or on a website, and therefore what will work technically; an intuition about what will appeal to the audience, in terms of stylization, tone-of-

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"professional competence" (Hall 1972, p. 61) – does, however, overlook one vital aspect of their work.

News production begins with events in the real world, regardless of whether these are emphasized out of all proportion to their potential significance, or even ignored entirely. In his article, Hall is able to break down the "signifying process" into successive stages, along with the various competencies associated with each of them (pp. 61-64). Advertising and design production, on the other hand, is not so much an accumulation of significations as an eruption, since the ad creative and the designer "invent" stories where none existed before. And this is why the creative person is possibly the most important actor - ideologically speaking - in the production of pieces of design, ads and commercials. Offering up concepts as if by magic, the ad creative's work in particular is then reified through the routines of the agency/office around him[7]. In this sense, his output is analogous to the news event in Hall's frame - although ad creatives and designers may routinely provide a number of "stories" (i.e. concepts) from which one will finally be chosen through more-or-less bureaucratic processes.

I have recently attempted (Soar 1996, 2000a) to raise a number of relevant questions, such as: how ideas are actually produced; how well the process can be explained; the influences – if any – that are at play; the investment that creatives have in their own accounts of the process; and, the ways in which these views might be affected by evidence of the less salutary efforts of the advertising and design "communities." In order to address these issues, it has been important to assess creatives and designers not

---

voice, pacing, use of humor, cultural references (such as the use of celebrities or 'inside' jokes), and so on.

[7] There are still very few women working in the creative departments of ad agencies (see, for example, Kazenoff & Vagnoni, 1997), whereas women working in design have historically faired much better. The convention I have adopted here is to use the masculine pronoun when referring to ad people, if only to emphasize this vast inequity.

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just as eminent individuals - be they celebrated mavericks[8] or even "auteurs" - but as a social stratum.

Since my previous efforts have been concentrated on advertising more than design, I will rehearse this common theoretical groundwork and then move on to present new evidence that specifically addresses the culture of professional graphic designers in North America. There are several reasons for refocusing my research agenda: (i) graphic designers have, historically speaking, been able to demonstrate a far broader range of political commitments than have ad creatives; (ii) reflecting this heterogeneity, the graphic design scene currently supports a variety of forums for exploring its cultural, political and social commitments, including magazines, journals, edited collections, conferences and ongoing debates – far in excess of anything offered by the advertising profession; and (iii) these assertions have been compounded and confirmed by my own career trajectory (including an abrupt shift from being a largely unquestioning advertising creative to a graphic designer working solely on progressive, non-profit projects).

The "Children of Marx and Coca-Cola": A Brief History of the Cultural Intermediaries

> [The "flexecutives"] know how hip, British pop culture works, and because they have hung on to it long enough to see it wasn't going to cause a revolution, they can sell the knowledge with a clear conscience. They're largely why the mainstream appropriates the underground so quickly now - there's a fifth column of thirtysomethings selling the battle plans to the businessmen and politicians - who are eager to buy, of course, because hip youth culture is "new" and "old" doesn't work. (Benson, 1999, p. 2)

Twenty years ago, Daniel Bell set out to explain *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Bell, 1976). His concern was, according to Martyn Lee, with the danger posed by a "generally hedonistic, spendthrift and throw-away ethic" (Lee, 1993, p.106).

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[8] I have in mind here such luminaries as Howard Gossage (Gossage, 1986), Bill Bernbach (see, for example, Levenson, 1987, but also Frank, 1997) and, most recently, the late Tibor Kalman (celebrated in Kalman, Hall & Bierut, 1998). While their contributions and attendant biographies often make for fascinating reading, we have yet to establish how representative they are of the rank and file professionals whose names we do not know so well.

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Capitalism, as a long-established economic system, had "always been fuelled by certain ascetic principles of self-denial" (p.106), which ensured that there was constant and sufficient re-investment in mass production. However, in light of the characteristically excessive tendencies of mass *consumption*, the perpetuation of investment might ultimately be insufficient to ensure capital's stability.

In his thesis, Bell identified a social constituency he referred to as the "cultural mass", whose members were mainly to be found "in the knowledge and communications industries [and] who, with their families, would number several million persons" (1976, p.20n). Bell's inventory included "writers... movie-makers, musicians" and those in "higher education, publishing, magazines, broadcast media, theater, and museums" (1976, p.20n). Inner circles within this group could be further distinguished by their particularly heightened cultural attunement. He located the emergence of this loose affiliation in the decline of the avant-garde:

> Today modernism is exhausted. There is no tension. The creative impulses have gone slack. It has become an empty vessel. The impulse to rebellion has been institutionalized by the "cultural mass" and its experimental forms have become the syntax and semiotics of advertising and haute couture. (1976, p.20)

Here, it is this appropriately-named "mass" which (unfairly) enjoys the status of artists *and* the trappings of bourgeois society: they have "the luxury of 'freer' lifestyles while holding comfortable jobs." (1976, p.20) Moreover, they are "not the creators of culture but the *transmitters*" (p.20n); they merely "process and influence the reception of serious cultural products" (p.20n) - and only then does this group "produce the popular materials for the wider mass-culture audience." (p.20n)

It would appear that the relative legitimacy of the cultural mass is dependent on how the particular formulation of this shift is conceived. For example, a more positive conceptualization is to be found in the work of Mike Featherstone. Reworking and

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updating Bell's assertions, he characterizes the new cultural intermediaries[9] as "those in media, design, fashion, advertising, and 'para' intellectual information occupations, whose jobs entail performing services and the production, marketing and dissemination of symbolic goods" (1991, p.19). It is important to note that whereas for Bell the so-called cultural mass seems to emerge as an *effect* of the "corrosive force" (Featherstone, 1991, p.8) of modernism, for Featherstone, the new cultural intermediaries are rather more significant, if not instrumental. Indeed, for at least one informed observer, "Featherstone argues convincingly that postmodernism is primarily to be understood... as the product of the 'new cultural intermediaries' and perhaps only secondarily, or at second hand, as a truly popular phenomenon" (McGuigan, 1992, p.216).

McGuigan, for his part, asserts that the intermediaries have emerged from the "radical middle-class youth of the 1960s" (1992, p.218), although for them "'[r]esistance' is reduced to the knowing consumption of consumer products" (Callinicos, 1989, p.170). Their fate is summed up in Callinicos' caustic comment - after Jean-Luc Godard[10] - that they are best seen as the "children of Marx and Coca Cola" (1989, p.170; see also Lee, 1993, p.107). Featherstone, too, maintains that the class of intermediaries "includes those from the counterculture who have survived from the 1960s and those who have taken up elements of their cultural imagery in different contexts" (1991, p.21).

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[9] This is my preferred term, given the dubious overtones of Bell's nebulous "cultural mass." It is also the most commonly-used and inclusive moniker among many alternatives (with varying degrees of relevance), some of which follow: New petite bourgeoisie (Bourdieu 1984); the service class, the new (postmodern) class fraction (Lash & Urry 1987); cultural specialists, cultural entrepreneurs, para-intellectuals, symbolic specialists, new tastemakers (all Featherstone 1991); flexecutives (Benson 1998). See also Lee (1993).

[10] Godard coined this phrase in reference to the young French characters in his film *Masculine-Feminine* (1966 France/Sweden).

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From Commercial Artists to Cultural Intermediaries

We are now in a position to consider pieces of design and advertisements as the contrived, and somewhat reflective, communications of an obscure elite, whose members continually attempt to bridge the paradox between their artistic impulses and the economic constraints to which they are tied. David Harvey characterizes creatives by the slightly sinister trait of feeding on "serious cultural products" and then producing (excreting?) "popular materials for the wider mass-culture audience" (1991, p. 68). Featherstone, while acknowledging that they may indeed "ransack various traditions and cultures" (1991, p. 19), detects a certain predicament in propagating what Roland Marchand has labeled their "elite provincialism" (Marchand, 1985, p. xvii):

> Their habitus, dispositions and lifestyle preferences are such that they identify with artists and intellectuals, yet under conditions of the demonopolization of artistic and intellectual commodity enclaves they have the apparent contradictory interests of sustaining the prestige and cultural capital of these enclaves, while at the same time popularizing and making them more accessible to wider audiences. (Featherstone, 1991, p. 19)

We might thus contrast a conception of ad creatives and graphic designers as "culture vultures" (via Harvey) with the notion of "*cultured* vultures" (via Featherstone). Both formulations compare favorably with Lears' description of the "extraordinarily talented people" (1994, p. 262) who have been associated with advertising:

> These artists and writers have served, in a sense, as emissaries between social universes: the agency-client world and the wider population; art and big business; museum and commercial culture. They have worked various boundaries, sometimes creatively reconnecting aesthetics and everyday life, more often conforming out of necessity to the constraints of agency organization. (p. 262)

For Bourdieu, then, the members of this class fraction "are forced to invent the skillfully ambiguous discourses and practices that were, so to speak, inscribed in advance in the very definition of [their] position" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 366n) - as both constituents of a fraction characterized by the work it performs, involving "presentation and representation" (p. 359), *and as consumers*; i.e. class fraction *and* taste culture:

> the new petite bourgeoisie is predisposed to play a vanguard role in the struggles over everything concerned with the art of living, in particular, domestic life and

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> consumption, relations between the sexes and the generations, the reproduction of the family and its values (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 366; also quoted in Bonner & du Gay, 1992, p. 177)

This vanguard role is achieved and maintained most forcefully through the values and attitudes purveyed through advertising and design images - and through which the intermediaries can most clearly be understood as having an authorial function.

The Short Circuit

> The primary audience of consumers was so distant, and evidences of its approval so impersonal and uncertain, that the creative elite became heavily dependent on this secondary audience of colleagues....the most powerful audience was other advertising professionals. (Marchand, 1985, p.82.)

There is a pedagogic function, then, in advertising and design, in which private codes are disseminated to a broader cultural mass via the creatives. Indeed, their own cultural readings are highly attuned, being "perfect" consumers operating in a particularly rarefied social milieu. They also "consume" ads and design concepts written by other people, sometimes in hyper-critical ways; they "consume" award-winning and/or controversial design and advertising work; and they gravitate towards any number of fashionable cultural "watering holes" which provide sustenance, inspiration, or even "rip-off material." These are inevitably subject to a high level of turnover in the constant movement toward new experiences, styles, or graphic "looks", but have included magazines such as *The Face*, club culture, and film or music "scenes."

Given this assertion, Johnson's description of lived cultures - formerly assumed to refer to consumers in general - takes on a very particular significance. He writes of "the existing ensembles of cultural elements already active within particular social milieux...and the social relations on which these combinations depend. These reservoirs of discourses and meanings are in turn raw material for fresh cultural production. They are indeed among the specifically cultural conditions of production" (1986/87, p.47).

The so-called children of Marx and Coca-Cola can finally be located as a producing and consuming cohort which acts, at least in the latter realm, as an

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autonomous, or self-addressing entity. Here, the members of this group draw sustenance from their own ranks, i.e. *from the work of other cultural intermediaries.* Collaboration between them is common. Art directors habitually call on the expertise of photographers, illustrators, and typographers; photographers work with stylists, models, and model makers; producers of films, ads, and TV shows depend on orchestrated collaborations of writers, art directors, actors, set designers, costume designers, model makers, musicians, and animators. A second level of activity involves the handling, sometimes at a distance, of one intermediary's work by several others. Advertising is again an illuminating example: the creative team provides a promotional platform for a commodity which has probably already been the result of successive involvements by product/industrial designers (and their model makers), and then packaging designers (with illustrators, photographers, and typographers). The work of the ad creatives may then be augmented by other promotional activities such as in-store displays (point-of-sale designers; retail and store-display designers); sales promotions (art directors and copywriters working with a similar number of intermediaries); and, direct marketing (art directors and copywriters, again).

In Johnson's original formulation, the circuit represented a way of understanding "the production and circulation of subjective forms" (Johnson, 1986/87, p.47). It also concerned, in its latter moment, the realm of "public" consumption (and by inference an unspecified consumer). Here, we have understood "reading or cultural consumption as a production process in which the first product becomes a material for fresh labour"; i.e. from "text-as-produced" to "text-as-read" (p. 58). However, my claim here is that we can also consider a secondary, privatized loop which falls short of the more usual pattern. This I call the "short circuit" (see figure 2.), and it is one in which the cultural intermediaries thereby act as producers *and* consumers. This circuit of meaning is "short" in two senses: most obviously, it is faster, suggesting that the cultural capital so carried is channeled back around to the intermediaries long before it works its way into,

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and through, the public domain; in addition, and in contrast, the notion of an electrical short-circuit provides for the idea that this attenuated arrangement is perhaps detrimental to the functionality of Johnson's larger, more conventional circuit.

I will readily acknowledge that, in countering the conflation of text and production, there is an attendant danger of conflating "creativity" with originality. This is, to my mind, a pitfall which we would do well to avoid. As it happens, it is Roland Barthes who reminds us that

> a text is...a variety of writings, none of them original....a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture....the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original....the inner "thing" he thinks to "translate" is itself only a ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely... (Barthes, 1981, p.211)

Having at the outset rejected the dogmatic overtures of semiotics, I think we can still draw a valuable lesson from Barthes' assertion. While it is conceivable that an ad creative or designer might see his or her own work as entirely without precedent, the fact remains that there are fundamental expectations - among clients, ad executives, and audiences - that make such an absolutist position untenable (if not plain ludicrous). My own view is that we can neither treat these putative authors as "dead" nor omnipotent. Similarly, their output is no more derived from a "ready-formed dictionary" than it is conjured up from the ether, *sui generis*.

A clue to the resultant conundrum may lie in the habitual claims made in the name of "creativity." At the limit, I would argue that this capacity or gift, this frustratingly nebulous process, simply acts as a kind of ideological smokescreen: it shields the intermediaries - particularly ad creatives - from the potential epiphany that their endeavors might merely be the prosaic, artless instruments of capital accumulation; and, it deflects societal scrutiny away from the self-same discovery, planting it instead in the ever-attractive spectacle of charisma, showmanship, and entertainment. Furthermore, the distinct impression given in previous interviews is that these people are all, paradoxically, unique and original thinkers; a community of

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mavericks. This may be necessarily so, since the alternative is for them to understand themselves as part of a process; a systematic set of representations in which individual ads are not so much personal gestures as ideologically predetermined contributions to the "discourse through and about objects" (Leiss *et al.*, 1990, p. 5). It is this paradox, above all, that has dominated my prior investigations.

Conclusion

> The study of visual form and language is limited if it does not consider the forces of cultural production, which involve a set of social relations between producer and audience. (Howard, 1994, p. 76)

So far I have explored the class fraction that Bourdieu has identified as the cultural intermediaries. I have suggested that the intermediaries draw on their own, "authored" array of cultural products so as to demarcate their cultural and social attitudes. In order to schematize this activity, I proposed a modified version of Richard Johnson's circuit of culture. The short circuit posits that, in terms of cultural production, the intermediaries' first audience - and hence their first source for inspiration - is themselves and their work. This effectively circumvents both consumers-at-large *and* the marketing routines that the intermediaries ostensibly employ to reach them. Understood as a *cultural* constituency, therefore, I have attempted to show that institutional constraints are of greatly reduced consequence in the study of ad creatives and designers. As Hirschman (1989) has shown, people working in ad agencies generally *believe* that copywriters and art directors are indeed the originators of advertisements and commercials, and numerous annual awards programs[11] for advertising *and* design reinforce this attitude. As a consequence, I want to argue in principle that there is some critical leverage to be had from exploring a broadly

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[11] Among those currently in operation at the national or international level are the Art Directors Club Annual, One Show, the D&AD Awards, the Campaign Press Awards, the Eurobest Awards, and the Cannes Lions.

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conceived notion of authorship in commercial cultural production, although precisely how much leverage remains to be seen.

Ultimately, it is the *contradictions* that exist between notions of structure on the one hand, and agency on the other, that have motivated my thinking to date, together with a rejection of positions that support a principled adherence to one at the expense of the other. By contrast, the work presented in this dissertation reflects an attempt to produce a more nuanced analysis of cultural production by exploring the relationship between the constraining and enabling effects of commercial work on non-commercial activities. This is made all the more feasible because of a climate within the design community that is often conducive to self-reflection and, in tandem, because of very recent developments in social and cultural investigation that go some way to enabling and legitimating this line of thinking.

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CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW: GRAPHIC DESIGN & CULTURAL THEORY

Introduction

In this chapter I seek to situate the dissertation research by identifying and evaluating two formally distinct literatures: the first directly concerns graphic design and designers, and has recently begun to emerge from *within* the professional and educational community most closely associated with the practice of graphic design itself. This discourse includes design writing, design criticism, critical journalism, and graphic design history. The second literature comprises several strands of scholarly investigation that are applicable to this current study, and are drawn directly or indirectly from sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, media studies and mass-communication theory. (These include the sociological investigations of Pierre Bourdieu, especially Bourdieu (1984), ethnographic research on cultural production, and a novel intervention - generated largely in the UK - called cultural economy.) There *are* overlaps between these two otherwise disparate literatures, although not so much in terms of direct dialog; rather, they share certain terms, themes and commitments. It is precisely this gap that I have sought to inhabit in this dissertation.

I begin this review with a working assessment of the achievements and oversights of the first (i.e. graphic design) literature outlined above. The lion's share of this writing is preoccupied with lauding individual pieces of design (based on historical references, stylistic inflections, quality of execution, etc.), showcasing collections (portfolios from particular periods, studios, cities or countries), and treating designers as personalities (often framed as celebrities, mavericks, geniuses, enigmas, etc.). My focus, then, is on the exceptions to this more general, functional trend, meaning the kind of writing that adopts a more distanced and reflective stance; for example: critical writing that interrogates precisely the kind of preoccupation already outlined or tackles issues of social responsibility.

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Following on from this, I turn to two related matters at the heart of the second (i.e. cultural theoretical) literature: The place of empirical research on cultural producers within a broadly conceived approach to the study of contemporary media and culture; and, by extension, the conception of cultural producers as situated subjects with specific and *consequential* identities and attitudes. I begin, however, with a discussion of the most basic terms encountered in this research.

What is Graphic Design?

Philip Meggs' *A History of Graphic Design* (Meggs, 1998a), now in its third edition, is the *de facto* reference work on the development of this creative practice. Meggs locates the earliest origins of graphic design in the prehistoric cave paintings of Lascau, and also examines such epochal moments as the development of the alphabet, printing, and photography. In contrast, Richard Hollis, in *Graphic design: A concise history* (Hollis, 1994), begins his chronology in the late 1900s with the development of the art poster and its associated printing technologies. This said, however, William A. Dwiggins is commonly cited (Triggs 1995, p. 9; Thomson 1997; Meggs 1998a, p. 175; Bierut *et al.* 1999, p. 14) as the person who actually coined the terms "graphic design" and "graphic designer" in a 1922 essay entitled *New Kind of Printing Calls for New Design* (Dwiggins 1999), thereby locating the practice's modern development in the rise of industrial capitalism in North America.

Even today, however, the term "graphic design" has yet to receive acceptance and understanding beyond the confines of the profession itself. As Mildred Friedman noted during her tenure as design curator at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis: "graphic design has played a key role in the appearance of almost all print, film, and electronic media, as well as architectural and urban signage. Today it literally dominates our visual environment. Yet...there is only nominal acknowledgement of the

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significance of this least recognized visual art form."[12] (Friedman in Friedman *et al.* 1989, pp. 9-10)

Rick Poynor has recently noted the way that, on the rare occasions when an article on graphic design has appeared in the mainstream press, "the clock is zeroed" (Poynor 2001b; see also Poynor 2001c). He cites as evidence two recent articles in major newspapers in which each author was obliged to begin by explaining what graphic design *is*. The first was his own recent piece on Canadian designer Bruce Mau (Poynor 2000) published in the British newspaper *The Independent*, headlined, appropriately enough, *Is it Art? Is it Photography? No, actually, it's Graphic Design.* The second was a major review in the *Los Angeles Times* of a book by and about the celebrated designer Milton Glaser (Helfand, 2001a). It begins:

> In contemporary culture, graphic design is the generic term for the multidisciplinary practice of combining typography, images and, increasingly, some combination of media for the purpose of informing, instructing or persuading a given audience to do something. Graphic designers both conceive of such methods of persuasion and, to varying degrees, execute them. As emissaries of communication, they visualize solutions for the presentation of abstract data, turning ideas into things: They create books and magazines, posters and packaging, exhibitions and Web sites, logos and film titles. (Helfand 2001, p. 6)

It is all the more remarkable, given graphic design's cultural ubiquity, that - as both a practice and a collective noun for such a huge range of readily identifiable visual artifacts - it is also so thoroughly invisible. As recently as the mid-1990s even the term "graphic design" was still absent from many dictionaries (Wheeler, 1997).

As my own research has advanced, I have become aware of a surprising variety of slippages and conflations between and among certain associated terms: "design" is a catch-all word used to refer to a range of practices including fashion design, product design, and graphic design – but especially as a synonym for industrial design and/or

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[12] The exhibition *Graphic Design in America: A Visual Language History*, curated by Friedman at Walker Art Center in 1989, was conceived with the specific aim of raising public awareness of the profession and its output - according to then-Director of the AIGA Caroline Hightower (see Friedman *et al.* 1989, p. 7)

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architectural practice. It also functions as an abbreviated term *within* each profession, such that for graphic designers "design" refers exclusively to graphics, whereas for architects it refers to the creation of buildings, and so on. The term "Graphic arts" is often used as a subject category in library databases to refer to the creative aspects of both advertising *and* graphic design - as well as the allied activities of typographers and the commercial printing industry. Where the term appears in the name of an organization such as the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA), it refers chiefly to graphic design and art direction; the Graphic Arts Education and Research Foundation (GAERF), on the other hand, is concerned with commercial printing and its associated trades and technologies. A recent debate held among the members of the AIGA centered on whether this professional organization should change its name to the American Institute of Graphic Design. Ric Grefé, the current executive director of the AIGA recently proposed "communication design" or even "experience design" as preferable to the apparently anachronistic overtones of "graphic" design (Grefé 2001). Gui Bonsiepe (1994, p. 48), on the other hand, prefers "information designer" or "info-designer" for short.

Regardless of conflicting ideas about how to identify and demarcate the definitional boundaries of "graphic design", it is apparent that this has had a negligible effect on the range of historical events and artifacts that writers on graphic design have included as relevant subject matter, and hence as legitimate elements in its emergent history (cf Meggs 1998a). This has included topics as diverse as the visual communications (printed matter; flags; uniforms) of the Weimar period (Aynsley 1994) and the Third Reich (Heller 2000); the packaging of perfume and milk; zines; posters and other printed ephemera of the civil rights movement; corporate communications (annual reports; branding strategies); and, the visual history of AIDS activism (Crimp & Rolston 1990) and the women's movement (McQuiston 1997).

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The rather insular audience most closely associated with this kind of published work (i.e. graphic designers, writers, educators, students and historians) has only recently begun to coalesce as a critical constituency invested in improving the level of private and public discourse about graphic design. It should also be noted that there is a counter-tendency at work: as graphic design has sought to professionalize both its ranks and its discourse, there have been moves to demarcate certain practices as non-professional, amateur or even incompetent. For example, eminent graphic design historian and educator Philip Meggs has been particularly invested in policing the boundaries of legitimacy. One recent article by Meggs in the design press was titled *5 Top Designers Confess: 'I Never Went to Art School!'* (Meggs 1996). In another, Meggs railed against "a new generation of unschooled graphic designers - editors, public relations agents, secretaries and other do-it-yourself desktop publishers - [who] are totally ignorant of the rudiments of publication design and typography." (Meggs 1994, p. 162) The result, for Meggs, of the wider availability of computers and design software can only be "obscene typography" and "unimagined graphic atrocities" as this "tremendous capability is put into the hands of people who don't know an ampersand from a hole in the ground." (p. 161)

This kind of protectionism would be of little consequence for this study were it not for the fact that such maneuvers have a potential impact on how design is defined, the activities that are eligible for inclusion in the canon, and, consequently, the actualization of designers themselves. In short, professional demarcation has an effect on designers' self-perceptions: how they think of themselves, and what constitutes legitimate design practice.

On the Emergence of Critical Voices within the Design Community

> As the graphic design profession matures, the scope for critical analysis and evaluation of its history and theoretical discourses necessarily broadens. (Triggs 1995, p. 7)

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The Look of Critical Writing

On first blush, it would seem that "graphic design culture" (*Encyclopædia of 20th Century Graphic Design Periodicals* 2000, p. 33) – designers, educators, historians, critics – is very well represented and served in terms of the formal venues available to it for discussion and debate. Indeed, one recent estimate (*Number of Periodicals over Time; Number of Periodicals over Space* 2000, p. 53) put the number of design magazines and journals currently available in the US alone at over forty. (The same source indicates that the overall number of periodicals in circulation in Europe and North America has also risen exponentially since 1900 (p. 53).)

When one takes into consideration factors such as the focus of the editorial mission, the extent of circulation, and frequency of publication, however, it becomes apparent that their overall scope (at least in North America) is not quite as thorough or extensive as the sheer number of publications initially suggests. Indeed, while the most widely circulated and recognizable periodicals are all highly produced (full color; glossy paper stock; perfect bound; oversize) and distinctive in name – *Print*, *Graphis*, *Eye*, *I.D.*, their subtitles betray remarkably interchangeable editorial missions. These four periodicals are, respectively: *America's Graphic Design Magazine*; *The International Magazine of Design and Communication*; *The International Review of Graphic Design*; and, *The International Design Magazine*.

The *appearance* of comprehensive coverage was recently reinforced by the launch of a new design magazine called *[...]* (literally "dot dot dot") in 2000. The first issue began, not with a self-congratulatory fanfare, but with a thematic question: "Why another graphic design magazine?" In a bid to provide an answer - and thereby justify its existence - most of the editorial content was given over to an encyclopedic survey of "previous attempts." Although the editors were apparently trying to make a virtue out of an undeclared editorial direction, they actually committed themselves to the task of closing the gap between design writing and design practice by having contributors do

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both: visually arrange their written work on the journal's behalf. (It would seem, however, that delivering perceptive and informed writing within a visually compelling frame is a tall order, not least because designers are, historically and by their own admission, far more adept at the latter than the former.)

For a reader who seeks the kind of design writing that takes an objective, critical stance and routinely works to make connections beyond the immediate purview of design practice (for example), there have been some exceptional venues. One of these is *Eye: The International Review of Graphic Design*, which was founded, and for its first seven years edited, by Rick Poynor. During his tenure, which began in 1990, he saw *Eye*'s function as "combining the accessibility and entertainment of popular journalism with the authority and insight of academic writing" (Bailey 2000, p. 89) Unfortunately, he became "exasperated" (Bailey 2000, p. 89) with "designer/writers' fear of damaging personal or professional relationships" (Bailey 2000, p. 89). This perceived "apathy" (Bailey 2000, p. 89) caused Poynor considerable frustration. In a 1993 editorial he wrote, in an uncharacteristically grouchy tone: "What is the point of writing about graphic design?....Surely the reasons are self-evident: to understand graphic design as a profession we need history; to mature as communicators we need criticism and theory; just to keep in touch we need basic journalism." (Poynor, quoted in Bailey 2000, p. 89)

Another unintended clue to Poynor's frustration comes in an anecdote provided by Max Bruinsma, who succeeded Poynor as editor of *Eye*. Justifying *Eye*'s very high cover price, Bruinsma said: "I have witnessed graphic designers who, minutes after the new issue of *Eye* had landed on their doormat, were studying a small colour reproduction through a magnifier, in order to find out how it had been lithographed and printed. Of course, they concluded it was flawless. Production value of this kind is Value with the capital V of investment." (Bruinsma 2000, p. 6) It would seem, therefore, that some critics fear alienating a design community that may only be looking, rather than listening. As New York-based designer and writer Michael Rock

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put it: "Since many designers – reviving the old art school bias – eschew any theorising and demonstrate an alarming lack of curiosity about their own profession, there is a pitifully small audience for new writing." (Rock in Poynor & Rock 1995, p. 59)

The Emergence of Graphic Design Criticism

In his introduction to a collection of short essays on design (Heller, 1994) Steven Heller, himself a prolific author and editor of works on designing, designers, and designed objects, describes design criticism as a way to counter "cronyism" and "conventional celebratory 'journalism' in the trade press." He imagines an approach that champions "intellectual rigor" and that might develop and deploy a "critical vocabulary", even though older designers have already suggested this is nothing more than "name-calling." However, as Heller frames it, design criticism cannot be entirely fearless, particularly because he envisions "a body of criticism that will help legitimize the graphic design profession – in the way it did for architecture and industrial design." (p. xiii) The teleology implied here suggests that, as long as design criticism looks and acts the part, its content and conclusions will be moot.

In their 1995 article in *Eye* entitled 'What is this thing called design criticism?', writers Rick Poynor and Michael Rock conducted a relatively nuanced exchange about how this emergent practice might best be developed. A core problem they address in the article is the difficulty of finding suitable venues to practice this form of writing and research. For Poynor, because "professional magazines" have "[e]stablished editorial formats and the need to engage a broad professional audience", there are "pragmatic restrictions on what can be attempted and said" (p. 57). The resultant "journalistic criticism" is inadequate, since it "fails to make its critical positions sufficiently explicit." Poynor goes on: "we need, in short, a more academic form of criticism to compare with those generated by, for instance, art, literature or cultural studies." (p. 57) This he calls critical journalism.

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Perhaps the single most significant contribution to this agenda so far has been a three-issue special series of the journal *Visible Language* dedicated to exploring *Critical Histories of Graphic Design* (Blauvelt 1994/95). The editor of this series was Andrew Blauvelt, a writer, designer of repute, and currently Design Director at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. In providing a central thematic focus for the contributors' essays, he issued a call for the exploration of graphic design's "discursive spaces":

> discursive accounts would emphasize the opacity and complexity of relationships which allow for the production of graphic design and graphic designers, the understanding of the performative effects of such production, a critical understanding of the role of the subject (designer and audience) neither solely as a free, autonomous agent nor as an individual completely dominated or determined by the prevailing hegemony, the examination of the exclusions of graphic design history's canon and a move away from history as a chain of events to history as a space of critical positions. (Blauvelt 1994, p. 215)

The problematic outlined here by Blauvelt has much in common with a range of reflexive strategies already familiar to cultural studies practitioners. Further, as Blauvelt notes, graphic design history also displays a similar fixation on textual, or "object-oriented" (Blauvelt 1994, p. 208) forms of analysis.

In Summary

While there have clearly been some notable recent examples of critical thinking that have advanced debates about design beyond the immediate environs of design practice, these forays have so far been of the most tentative and exploratory nature. In the next section I turn the discussion to the realm of scholarly practice to assess the inroads being made to understand graphic design as a primary source of contemporary visual communication and culture. If a permanent bridge is to be built between these two isolated spheres of knowledge, so to speak, we would do well to assess the extent and quality of the construction work being undertaken on each side.

Critical Scholarship on Visual Culture and Graphic Design

Critical Sociologies of Art

I want to begin this section by briefly discussing two works that, in combination, provide an important foundation for the contemporary issues under discussion. Howard

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Becker's *Art Worlds* (Becker 1982) and Janet Wolff's *The Social Production of Art* (Wolff 1993) are both vital interventions of use to anyone invested in complicating the relationship between individual artistic endeavors and the social world within which they are embedded. Becker, for example, defines his project against the dominant tradition of the sociology of art, "in which creativity comes to the surface and the essential character of the society expresses itself, especially in great works of genius." (Becker 1982, p. xi) Indeed, he happily describes his work as, rather, "the sociology of occupations applied to artistic work." (Becker 1982, p. xi)

Both authors challenge the simplistic but prevalent notion of artists as entirely independent subjects, free at all times to dictate meaning in and on their own terms. For Wolff, then - and very much in the spirit of Becker (1982),

> an overemphasis on the individual artist as unique creator of a work is misleading, because it writes out of the account the numerous other people involved in the production of any work, and also draws attention away from the various social constituting and determining processes involved. (Wolff 1993, p. 137)

She continues: "the traditional concept of the artist as creator depends on an unexamined view of the subject, which fails to see the manner in which subjects are themselves constituted in social and ideological processes." (Wolff 1993, p. 137)

While designers and design writers have been understandably over-invested in the idea of individual authorship, sometimes to the point of deification, critical cultural theory has generally had very much the opposite tendency: to write off, or overlook entirely, the originary sources of any given text. These positions are of course entirely incompatible, and Wolff goes some way to providing a useful corrective to both positions. As she reminds us: "the author, now understood as constituted in language, ideology, and social relations, retains a central relevance...in relation to the meaning of the text (the author being the first person to fix meaning, which will of course subsequently be subject to redefinition and fixing by all future readers)" (Wolff 1993, p. 136)

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While there are, of course, significant differences between the roles of artists and designers, Wolff's assertions provide an excellent way of orientating a discussion about creative individuals that might otherwise drift between the poles of rank determinism on the one hand, and, on the other, unabashed hagiography and textual incontinence.

Histories of Art in the Service of Commerce

Michele H. Bogart's *Artists, Advertising, and the Borders of Art* (Bogart 1995) "investigates the fluctuations of status among illustrators, poster producers, art directors, photographers, and painters in relationship to conceptions and practices of fine art and commercial art in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century." (Bogart 1995, p. 4) The tensions inherent in these dynamics are neatly captured in Bogart's phrase "art for publicity" (p. 4): the continual attempt to meld a highly personal mode of expression with the broader needs of sales and marketing. Patricia Johnston's *Real Fantasies: Edward Steichen's Advertising Photography* (Johnston 1997) focuses on one artist in particular: Steichen was extraordinarily successful in adapting his skills to the needs of commerce. If he initially had difficulties reconciling the ethical implications of this relationship, Steichen still ended up making his name (and his fortune) out of it.

The development of graphic design as a distinct practice, and in relation to the principles and priorities of Modernism, has been explored extensively in Allen (1983), Friedman *et al.* (1989), Meggs (1998a), Jobling & Crowley (1996), Margolin (1997) and Lavin (2001). Among the major institutions referenced in these studies are the Bauhaus, the New Bauhaus Chicago (renamed the School of Design Chicago and ultimately the Institute of Design - see Wingler 1976), and the International Design Conference in Aspen (see especially Banham 1974; Allen 1983).

A connection is often made in these historical studies between the activities of artists, illustrators, photographers, art directors, industrial designers and graphic

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designers and visions of social, cultural and political change. Indeed, idealistic sentiments and utopian urges perhaps find their most intense expression at these "borders of art." Jobling & Crowley (1996) contend that "[t]he expression of such aspirations for the future implied a messianic role for the modern designer to prefigure a better world where visual communication would enlighten rather than simply reproduce the prevailing taste, attitudes and conditions of the day. Graphic design would, in [Bauhaus designer László] Moholy-Nagy's words, be 'part of the foundation on which the *new world* will be built'." (1996, pp. 143-144)

Some of these studies stress the erosion of the political tenets of modernist art and design as the movement gradually migrated from Europe to the United States (Wild 1989). This appears to have been located less in the specifics of graphic form or appearance, but rather in formative impulses and underlying intent. Indeed, it is perhaps a peculiarity of graphic design (including advertising design) that slippages of this nature routinely occur; that one can easily mimic a particular radical aesthetic without any recourse to the political or cultural moment that generated it – and often for the most mundane or normative of purposes. As Lorraine Wild maintains:

> Despite the rise of schools rooted in modernist theory, it is clear, looking back at the dissemination of Modernism in design in the United States just before and after World War II, that the look of modern graphic design became much more familiar than the ideas that helped generate it. The European modernists and their American counterparts found clients who were willing to put their theories into practice for commercial use; there was neither time nor necessity for the manifestos or ideology that had characterized the movement in Europe. (Wild 1989, p. 168)[13]

In *Clean New World: Culture, Politics and Graphic Design* (Lavin 2001) Maud Lavin explores the postwar ramifications of the gradual bowdlerization claimed by

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[13] Jobling & Crowley (1996) dispute this characterization, suggesting instead that "the process that Wild describes was already under way in Europe in the late 1920s....American culture, it would seem, stands indicted for something that was, arguably, an inevitable outcome of Modernism's uneasy cohabitation with commerce." (1996, p. 160) For a much expanded discussion of these issues, see James Sloan Allen's *The Romance of Commerce and Culture: Capitalism, Modernism, and the Chicago-Aspen Crusade for Cultural Reform* (Allen 1983).

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Wild. Lavin draws a dramatic contrast between present-day "corporate-client practitioners" in North America who effectively "cover, wrap, accent, or put into a clean envelope some messy realities" (p. 2) with "the historical and contemporary track record of graphics in making powerful political statements, in functioning as intriguing personal creations, and in consciously influencing cultural norms." (pp. 3-4) For Lavin, the result is not so much a bifurcated realm of design practice in which these two tendencies never mix, but a contemporary design scene in which "hamstrung power" (p. 6) is provisionally reconciled through "multitasking" practices. Throughout her book, Lavin emphasizes the gender dynamics at work. Describing the contemporary scene, she says:

> it's a time when women have at last come to the fore of the graphic design field. Yet they still earn less than their male counterparts. Perhaps because of the continuing economic inequity with design firms, women designers who do self-generated as well as corporate work have turned increasingly to a mix of teaching and self-employment structures that combine to create semi-independent, multitasking practices. Such multitasking in turn has provided a persuasive model for the field as a whole. (Lavin 2001, p. 4)

Importantly, Lavin faults design history and design criticism for failing to recognize the field's critical political potential and, in *Clean New World*, sets about "encouraging designers to recognize and deal creatively with the cultural power they do, in fact, have." (Lavin 2001, p. 6) This failure has much to do with the inherited preoccupations of history and criticism ("analyzing design products, compiling designer biographies, and developing a historical narrative of style influences" p. 6). Furthermore, as Lavin points out, "creating a style lexicon and a design canon also fits with the service mentality of how design is usually practiced: such writing is useful in the marketplace as resource material for designers." (p. 6) So, too, the purely *aesthetic* manifestations of modernism, as previously discussed.

Lavin (2001) identifies graphic design's core – and most conservative – activity as corporate-sponsored communications, particularly branding programs, logos, and annual reports (see also Squiers 1992). Indeed, the substantial early growth of the entire

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design profession has been directly linked to the "widespread corporate sponsorship" (Lavin 2001, p. 6) of the post-War years. This development also led to the lionization of men such as the modernist Paul Rand as key figures in, and contributors to, the history of graphic design in America (see for example Remington & Hodik 1989, and *6 Chapters in Design* 1997). Rand, for example, was identified as the sole creator of corporate identities for IBM, UPS and NeXT Computer.[14]

A counter narrative can be traced through various moments and movements that have been diametrically opposed to the burgeoning presence of corporate America. These have largely been the coordinated visual responses of small groups of committed individuals to a fairly narrowly defined cultural or political crisis. Notable examples include, in the U.S.A., artists' and activists' efforts during the civil rights and women's movements and the Vietnam war, and, more recently, anonymous collectives such as Guerrilla Girls (see for example *Confessions of the Guerrilla Girls* 1995), ACT UP and Gran Fury (eg Crimp & Rolston 1990), Women's Action Committee, Queer Nation, etc. (for two useful surveys that include all of these groups, see McQuiston 1993, 1997). The work of these *ad hoc* groups has tended to be characterized by "professionally" produced posters, flyers and T-shirts (for example); that is, graphic output that demonstrates a particular kind of conceptual sophistication and technical expertise that one is less likely to find with other alternative constituencies (e.g. among 'zine producers).

Sociological Perspectives on Graphic Design

The graphic design community has only recently begun an uneasy courtship with firmly established critical discourses on the media, culture and society. While design historian Victor Margolin has suggested that "there has been no history of design thinking, something that is badly needed" (1998, p. 170), Philip Meggs has also noted

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[14] The dedication at the beginning of *Looking Closer 2: Critical Writings on Graphic Design* (Bierut *et al.* 1997) reads "FOR PAUL RAND (1914-1996) *He was graphic design.*"

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that "We...need a body of literature relating graphic design to major philosophic concepts." (1998b, p. 93) A useful, if exceedingly rare, example is the essay by C. Wright Mills, *Man in the Middle: The Designer* (Mills 1963), originally presented as a talk at the International Design Conference in Aspen (IDCA). Mills was a Marxist sociologist and, in books such as *White Collar* (1951) and *The Power Elite* (1956), developed a reputation as a staunch critic of modern American ideals and the inequities of class. The IDCA, which still runs annually, has at times provided a novel, if somewhat elitist, forum for the discussion of issues rarely voiced in the day-to-day practices of architectural design, industrial/product design and graphic design (see for example Banham 1974; Allen 1983).

Much of the language used by Mills may seem rather dated to contemporary ears, but is no less evocative because of it: he talks of a "mass society" in which "[o]ur images of this world and of ourselves are given to us by crowds of witnesses we have never met and never shall meet. Yet for each of us these images – provided by strangers and dead men – are the very basis of our life as a human being." (p. 375) In this atomized, anonymous society, the (male) designer forms part of the "cultural apparatus": "By brand and trademark, by slogan and package, by color and form, he gives the commodity a fictitious individuality...confusing the consumer's choice and banalizing her sensibilities." (p. 379) Deterministic (and sexist) overtones aside, Mills' essay brings an early, and much-needed sociological eye to the activities of all kinds of designers. Indeed, Mills anticipates Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the cultural intermediary – an individual (i.e. "the man in the middle") whose function is to provide a bridge, or liaison between, two distinct worlds that can be variously labeled production and consumption, or manufacture and distribution, or commerce and culture: "His art is a business, but his business is art." (p. 374)

In Mills' imagination, this position is conceived as a tumultuous experience: "their dual investment in [the key problems of the overdeveloped society] ...explains

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the big split among designers and their frequent guilt; the enriched muddle of ideals they variously profess and the insecurity they often feel about the practice of their craft; their often great disgust and their crippling frustration." (p. 374) It is difficult to say in hindsight whether Mills imagined this fraught dilemma as the designers' inevitable fate, or if he was responding to and interpreting some specific malaise of the moment. What we do know is that there is evidence aplenty to suggest that widespread crises of conscience occur periodically in the profession, to which the two incarnations of the First Things First manifesto, almost forty years apart, amply attest (see Chapter 4.).

Mills' own solution was to invoke the values of integrity and independence he ascribed to craftsmanship (p. 384). For, in craftsmanship, "there is no ulterior motive" and "plan and performance are unified"; further, for the craftsman, "work is the mainspring of his life; he does not flee from work into a separate sphere of leisure." (pp. 384-385) Mills sums this up as follows: "Human society...ought to be built around craftsmanship as the central experience of the unalienated human being and the very root of free human development." (p. 386) This sentiment has much in common with the ethos developed at the Bauhaus; Mills' talk goes some way to explaining the degree to which this social idealism - imported as it was from Europe - had already become diluted or despoiled in the post War years of American industrial ascendancy. In some ways, Mills' approach is now more useful for what it anticipates rather than what it actually achieves as a form of critique.

Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, has done much to facilitate our understanding of the so-called cultural intermediaries, particularly in the theoretical and field research project he directed and published as *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Bourdieu 1984). In this book he developed and explored several concepts, including cultural capital, to explain the naturalization and perpetuation of class inequities in postwar France. Key among the constituencies he identified were the "new petite bourgeoisie", a.k.a. the new cultural intermediaries (1984, p. 366).

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According to Bourdieu, then, the members of this class fraction "are forced to invent the skillfully ambiguous discourses and practices that were, so to speak, inscribed in advance in the very definition of [their] position" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 366n) - as both constituents of a fraction characterized by the work it performs, involving "presentation and representation" (p. 359), *and as consumers*; i.e. class fraction *and* taste culture: "the new petite bourgeoisie is predisposed to play a vanguard role in the struggles over everything concerned with the art of living, in particular, domestic life and consumption, relations between the sexes and the generations, the reproduction of the family and its values" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 366; also quoted in Bonner & du Gay, 1992, p. 177)

It is worth noting that the ideological or structural constraints implied by Bourdieu (i.e. "forced to invent"; "inscribed in advance"; "predisposed") are also to be found in Mills' essay, as the following passage illustrates:

> The consciousness of men does not determine their existence; nor does their existence determine their consciousness. Between the human consciousness and material existence stand communications and designs, patterns and values which influence decisively such consciousness as they have. The mass arts, the public arts, the design arts are major vehicles of this consciousness. (Mills 1963, p. 375)

In contemporary parlance, however, one might say that the cumulative effect of these forces is *both* constraining *and* enabling (cf Giddens' theory of structuration - see, for example, Giddens 1979); indeed, the last few decades of social and cultural theory on the role of the subject have served to complicate even this formulation (Fiske 1989, Radway 1991, de Certeau 1984). Although contributions such as these have been advanced both theoretically and empirically, and conceived from a fair range of epistemological standpoints, most studies emphasizing *enabling* relationships to the media have concerned consumption rather than production. Is it possible or even desirable, then, to explore the enabling effects of media and cultural production with respect to the subjective experiences of the cultural intermediaries?

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Theories of Cultural Production

In a short essay entitled *All the World's a Stage, Screen or Magazine: When Culture is the Logic of Late Capitalism* Angela McRobbie (1996) argues for the importance of studying "the production of culture" and "the sort of people who now work in culture, or who aspire to work in culture" (1996: 336). Further, McRobbie calls into question several undesirable trends that she detects within cultural studies as it has been practiced. These are tendencies towards "overtheorizing" and a "confin[ement]...to the world of the text" - both of which can be understood, at least partially, as the result of "fairly damning critiques of...empiricism, ethnography and the category of experience" (1996: 337). Clearly, one way to work *against* this textualism is to actively engage with McRobbie's "three E's" (i.e. "empiricism, ethnography and the category of experience").

In the introduction to his ethnographic study of the production of a documentary series about childhood for American public television, Barry Dornfeld (1998) states:

> An ethnographic approach to cultural production offers the possibility of rethinking and bridging the theoretical dichotomy between production and consumption, between producers' intentional meanings and audience members' interpreted meanings, and between production studies and reception studies. In doing so, it transcends disabling debates in media studies, moving beyond the binaries of media power versus resistance, ideology versus agency, and production versus reception (1998, 12-13)

It is precisely these issues that confront the scholar intent on studying the micro-processes of cultural production, be it television, advertising, fashion – or graphic design. Importantly, Dornfeld recognizes that his research agenda can be usefully understood not merely as a particularistic and insular project, but as a modest intervention that nevertheless circumvents some of the most familiar divisive positions that underpin contemporary studies of culture and the media.

This is a necessarily self-conscious mode of scholarship, in which the researcher clearly recognizes the novelty and implications of her work, and even anticipates a broad range of formal criticisms. Reflecting on her ongoing work on young fashion

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designers and fashion journalists in the UK, McRobbie (1996, 1998, 2000) notes, in a passage with the subheading *'Merely Empirical'?*, that "Creative labour has been overlooked in media and cultural studies in recent years to the point that almost everything but work has been the subject of extensive attention." (1998, p.175) She goes on: "It has been difficult to find a single, over-arching, theoretical framework from within existing scholarship which would comfortably contain the current study of work and livelihoods in fashion." (p.175)

McRobbie, too, sounds a note of potential reconciliation: while making very modest claims about the ramifications of her work, she asserts that it is no less worthy than the formidable body of theoretical research that effectively militates against her own research agenda. She notes, for example, that Fredric Jameson, the eminent theorist of literature and postmodernism - "[d]espite the dazzling range of his scholarship" – "sidesteps the question of the institutional, commercial and educational conditions of cultural production in favour of a trenchant critique of postmodern forms....There is no concern in his writing with who produces these forms and under what socio-economic conditions." (1996, p.337) And, of British political economist Nicholas Garnham, she says: "What Garnham sees as a regrettable feature of the inexorable processes of capitalism, I consider as an integral, emergent (if also regrettable) but by now, in the late 1990s, an almost predictable feature of the working practices of cultural capitalism." (1998, p.175)

McRobbie is also at pains to point out that her study is "more exceptional than exemplary" (p.176), thereby diffusing another potential criticism – that in attending to the subjective specificities of cultural production, this kind of research has nothing to tell us about the larger inequities of market capitalism. She draws implicit support from those few scholars who commit to an "obstinate straddling of 'big' global political issues with an equally energetic commitment to the politics of meaning as manifest at the micro-social level." (McRobbie 2000, p.2)

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Indeed, a key strength of recent ethnographies of cultural production (for example Lutz & Collins 1993; Henderson 1990, 1995, 1999; and Dornfeld 1998) lies in the researchers' willingness to explore the subjective experiences of cultural producers *despite* the principled flak this strategy often seems to provoke. As Dornfeld (1998) argues:

> We need to rethink producers as particular types of agents, producing media texts within contexts constrained by both culture, ideology, and economy, but operating within particular social locations and frameworks, not floating above society, as many approaches to the study of media forms seem to imply. This kind of reorientation would allow us to discuss with greater specificity and clarity the relationship between media forms and practices and the larger public spheres they produce and are situated within. (Dornfeld, 1998: 13)

While McRobbie characterizes her own project as an essentially novel one, Dornfeld (and indeed Henderson) recognizes his own work as growing out of a very specific literature. As he makes clear, particularly in the endnotes to Chapter One of *Producing Public Television* (Dornfeld 1998), this heritage includes the development of visual anthropology and the anthropology of visual communication (cf Worth 1980, Worth & Gross 1981).

So why hasn't this research been done already?: Further obstacles

Advertising texts (ads; commercials) are immediately recognizable as "advertising" to most people and, as I suggested in Chapter 1, have received a considerable amount of critical attention. However, like graphic design, the *production* of advertising understood from a *cultural rather than socio-historical perspective* remains a relative mystery (Soar 1996, 2000a). The reasons for this remain unclear, though chief among them must be: a principled opposition to this type of inquiry on the grounds that it offers negligible critical leverage (cf McRobbie's comments, above); a certain textualism in the academy that has long valorized the analysis of texts (see Chapter 1) over other key moments in the circuit of culture (Johnson 1986/87), for example: cultural production, reproduction, and reception (although the latter has recently garnered considerably more attention - Ang 1991, Lewis 1991, Radway 1991);

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the novelty and convenience of being able to "capture" these texts in bulk for analysis, via video technology (Lewis 1991, p. 33); and, the concurrent difficulty of gaining sustained access to these sites of *commercial* cultural production. This last point is not merely the consequence of professional confidentiality, but an always present tension between the interests and ideological investments of advertisers versus academic investigators.[15]

If we now review this list with reference to graphic design, it becomes clear that design practice is doubly insulated from critical attention: not only is there a widespread disinterest in studying cultural production (and *commercial* cultural production in particular) but, as we have seen, most people are not even sure what "graphic design" is - as an array of artifacts, let alone as a cultural practice. It may also be that the sense of urgency that has accompanied the critical analysis of ads and commercials - given the pressing need to tackle their highly problematic nature - has simply eclipsed the generally less offensive output of the design business. Finally, on this point, it must be said that folks in the graphic design community are generally much more accessible and approachable, not least because they are often sympathetic to the need to develop an ongoing critique of the business, its investments, and its aspirations.

In Summary: The Potential for a Cultural Economy of Graphic Design

While critical media scholarship often treats the commercial media system as inherently counter-democratic, and, through its products and corporate policies, as an overwhelmingly conservative cultural force, we should recognize that this orientation is *institutional*: it will not suffice as a universal characterization of the system *and* all those who work in it. To the extent that we invest emancipatory potential in the subjective experiences of (some) media audiences, we would also do well to note the

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[15] Issues associated with the politics of access to sites of cultural production are discussed in, for example, Lutz & Collins (1993), Gitlin (1983), Dornfeld (1998), Henderson (1990, 1995, 1999).

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progressive (and, on occasion, radical) micro-currents at play within media organizations of all sizes.

Very recent developments in field research on fashion designers (McRobbie, 1998, 2000), ad men (Nixon, 1997a, 1997b), and retail workers (du Gay, 1996), and the general development of a cultural economy perspective (du Gay, 1997; du Gay & Pryke 2002; Nixon 2002), threaten to complicate a neat but fallacious binary opposition between homogenized productive forces on the one hand, and liberatory consumption practices on the other. They also provide a fresh perspective on selected work cultures– sites that are responsible for generating the media and cultural texts that, in the rush to analysis, have been routinely disarticulated from their generative environments.

By broadening the focus of critical attention in these ways we can continue to tease out the characteristic contours of the relationship between the subjective claims of designers and the structural constraints within which they generally operate; to explore the ways in which commercial practice *enables* non-commercial endeavors; and, to identify those subjective and/or structural elements that ultimately result in both emancipatory and pernicious "texts" alike. Ultimately, then, a cultural economy approach - broadly defined - holds the promise of opening up a critical space in which to further develop our understanding of the intermediaries and, by extension, contemporary culture.

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CHAPTER 3

LIFE INSIDE THE SHORT CIRCUIT: GRAPHIC DESIGN'S HABITUS

> Graphic design is absolutely ripe for symptomatic analysis.... what is the internal discourse of design, and what are the narratives that it tells itself about what it's doing? (Drucker 1998, p. 143)

Introduction: Design/Work/Lifestyle

The model set out in Chapter 1 posited a dynamic cultural relationship or tendency I have called the short circuit. This model identifies the intermediaries as having a privileged place in the circuit of culture, such that their own dispositions, values and tastes take precedence over those of communities, constituencies or individuals who are not directly involved in cultural production - in short, those who are the ostensible audiences (both direct and indirect) for the intermediaries' considerable output. In effect, then, the implication of the short circuit is that the primary audience the intermediaries have in mind is their peers, such that the increasingly professionalized discourse of graphic designers, for example, is *about* design and designers *for the sake of* design and designers[16].

This relationship suggests the existence of a kind of contemporary "design culture", in which the career-based, 9-to-5 interests of designers bleed into, and in some ways are indistinguishable from, their private, 'consumerly' selves. At its most basic, then, my claim here - consistent with a nascent cultural economy approach - is that 'work' (i.e. production) is as much a *cultural* activity as is 'leisure' (consumption). This is especially so in the case of the intermediaries for, as Bourdieu suggests, it is this group which "comes into its own in all the occupations involving the presentation and representation (sales, marketing, advertising, public relations, fashion, decoration and so

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[16] Take as a brief example this quote from graphic designer and educator Jessica Helfand, in which she refers to the work of David Carson, another designer who has been variously celebrated and decried for his profound influence on editorial design: "By the time he was knee-deep in [designing the monthly music and style magazine] *RayGun* we were all subscribing...and the readership's demographic target was shot to hell." (Helfand 2001b, p. 97)

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forth) and in all the institutions providing symbolic goods and services." (Bourdieu 1984, p. 359)

Habitus and Graphic Design

In this chapter, I build on, and extend, the notion of the short circuit by drawing on the conceptual term Bourdieu calls 'habitus.' (Bourdieu 1984) This enormously productive notion has recently been discussed by Garry Stevens in relation to the professional milieu of architects (Stevens 1998) in Australia. Given the relevance of Stevens' recent project to my own[17], it is his particular interpretation and application of Bourdieu's ideas that I have chosen to follow here. Habitus is defined by Stevens as

> a set of internalized dispositions that incline people to act and react in certain ways, and is the end product of what most people would call socialization or enculturation....One's habitus generates perceptions, attitudes and practices. It is at once the filter through which we interpret the social world, organizing our perceptions of other people's practices, and the mechanism we use to regulate our actions in that world, producing our own practices. In this sense it is a *structuring* structure. (Stevens 1998, pp. 57-58)

The import of Bourdieu's concept is considerable if one is attempting to address the activities and values of a social group while acknowledging both the enabling and constraining forces that define it. The latter tension may be of particular significance when we consider the culture of graphic design as inclusive of a set of *working* practices; that is, as a habitus that is both professional and domestic/leisure-oriented.

While one might usefully say that some avenues of contemporary cultural theory can be characterized as attaching more consequence to factors that enable rather than constrain, the workplace is probably one of the least likely environments to garner this kind of attention: it is far easier to argue for the empowerment or resistive pleasures that can be derived in the sphere of consumption (viewing a popular TV show, for example) than from the performance of a given task in the workplace, i.e. the sphere of production. To connect the two spheres and treat them as a unified, coherent habitus is,

[17] For a few brief comments on the formal and stylistic links between contemporary architecture and graphic design, see Lupton & Miller 1994, pp. 351-353.

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I suspect, a rare strategy indeed - although, as we have seen, it is certainly consistent with the sort of ethnographic research demonstrated by Dornfeld (1998), for example.

Stevens' background is in architectural engineering, and it is his own experience of the tensions between this particular branch of the profession and the far more prestigious realm of architectural practice *per se* which provides a major impetus for the study[18]. He identifies, and goes on to explore, what he calls in the book's title a "favored circle" of architects: an inner, publicly celebrated clique that demonstrates extensive cultural capital, marked favoritism in terms of training and promotion, and not a little arrogance.

Stevens finds Bourdieu's insights very helpful, noting that he (Stevens) is a lone voice among other writers who take a sociological perspective on architectural practice. The inference seems to be that for others to recognize Bourdieu's ideas would pose an immediate threat to the status quo. Indeed, Stevens notes the marked hostility he experienced within the profession once the nature of his own project became clear: that it was somehow taboo; that, in undertaking the project, he was merely exposing his own lack of judgment and *good taste*. (The subtitle of Bourdieu's book, we should remember, is *A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*.) For some, then, Stevens' project is more than just tasteless: it is positively *outré*. Similarly, the implicitly inferior status of architectural engineering as a professional career is made explicit in terms of its lack of both economic *and* cultural capital.

My sense is that the graphic design community is comparable in principle to the architectural community - as discussed by Stevens - in the sense of supporting, at least implicitly, a hierarchy of voices. There is certainly at least one familiar, if not favored, inner circle of designers and/or design writers in the US; a short roster of individuals

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[18]Architectural engineers are responsible for the vital, yet relatively unglamorous, task of designing the hidden structural and service elements - ventilation, elevators, heat, water, waste, etc. - that ensure the basic viability and inhabitability of the conceptual sketches and models with which architects are most routinely associated.

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who most often appear as jurists on awards shows, as featured designers in trade magazines, as conference keynote and plenary speakers, as the authors of articles covering a range of topics (mostly confined to the design press, but occasionally in the "mainstream" press); and, more rarely, as the subjects of voluminous retrospectives, in both print and exhibition formats (see Poynor 2001d). One "name" designer has even referred to this milieu - of which he is a prominent member - as "the usual suspects" (Bierut 1999), a reference to the fact that these individuals make up the bulk of the thirty-three signatories of the recently relaunched First Things First manifesto (discussed in detail in Chapter 4).

While Stevens goes so far as to suggest that it is formative social connections *rather than* talent that creates and perpetuates architecture's professional hierarchy, I do not believe this is so for graphic design. (Indeed, while it is clearly unfair to characterize Stevens's work as no more than "splenetic resentment" (quoted in Pearlman 2000, p. 79), as some have, it does seem that he occasionally overstates his case for rhetorical effect.) While graphic design's elite may not speak for the entire profession (and, indeed, while "the profession" may not represent all those who do design work in the US[19]), there are other factors that must be recognized aside from the most obvious manifestations of 'talent.' Certainly there continue to be mentoring relationships: it is apparent, for example, that certain of today's 'name' designers were trained by, or worked closely with, 'name' designers of yesteryear. (For example, W. A. Dwiggins was taught by type designer Frederic Goudy; more recently, Jessica Helfand was taught by Paul Rand; Michael Bierut worked for Massimo Vignelli; Stefan Sagmeister and Marlene McCarty worked for Tibor Kalman at M & Co., etc.)

Most notably, however, the sheer antagonism apparent in Stevens' chosen site of research is markedly absent in the graphic design community. Of course there *are*

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[19] One recent - and very modest - estimate put the number of practicing graphic designers in the US at around 350,000. (Davis 1998, p. 25)

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exceptions, but these seem to be isolated rather than chronic. Indeed, my own recent experience of this particular community (as a designer, writer and speaker) suggests that it is altogether more supportive, egalitarian and respectful of differences of opinion and status than one might typically expect in the world Stevens describes - not to mention rather more receptive to investigation.

'Essential Ambiguities': Sustaining the Short Circuit and Protecting the Habitus

In this section I consider some of the ways in which designers come to define and reinforce their cultural identities as key members of the - resolutely invisible - intermediaries. These strategies can be understood here as a sustained (though unconscious) attempt to nourish and further delineate their habitus (for example, through debates about the uses and abuses of professionalization). There is much to be said for making these intermediaries (or at least their *practices*) more visible, and for several reasons: to aid in ease of investigation, to demystify contemporary visual culture for the purposes of critical reflection (for example, in media literacy efforts), and - from the designers' perspective - to increase awareness of (and perhaps respect for) their nascent profession. However, there may also be a *counter* tendency at play, since one way for designers to protect their professional competencies (i.e. the monopoly of knowledge that is already perceived to be under threat in some quarters) is to remain hidden or obscure. We can begin to see, then, that there are various competing tendencies - all of which, it could be argued, have the capacity to strengthen *or* weaken the viability of the short circuit and the integrity of the designers' habitus. This contradiction is hinted at in the following statement:

> the new cultural intermediaries are inclined to sympathize with discourses aimed at challenging the cultural order....But in fact these occupations condemn their occupants to the essential ambiguity resulting from the discrepancy between the (symbolically) subversive dispositions linked to their position in the division of labour and the manipulative or conservative functions attached to the position, between the subjective image of the occupational project and the objective function of the occupation. (Bourdieu 1984, p. 366)

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We can now begin to appreciate that the theme of social engagement and dissent that attends the discourse of graphic design - at conferences, in magazines, in conversation - may be less an accurate reflection of the overall make up of currently existing practices, and more a wishful addendum to the kind of commercial activities that more or less typify contemporary design work. While this chapter stresses precisely the "typical", meaning the most generally applicable characteristics of the habitus, and hence the short circuit it fuels, subsequent chapters are concerned with the themes of social critique and dissent found both off-center from (Chapter 4), and at the periphery of (Chapter 5), graphic design practice and, specifically, at its intersections with visual art and activism.

Stevens does a useful job of summarizing the four kinds of cultural capital identified by Bourdieu (Stevens 1998, p. 62-63) and which, in combination, contribute to the viability of the habitus. I will refer to these in the remainder of this chapter. They are, briefly: institutionalized cultural capital (academic and educational attainments); objectified cultural capital (works of art and other symbolic goods); social capital (networks of friends, associates; aligned with class interests); and, embodied cultural capital (tastes, attitudes, preferences, clothes, cars).

A General Outline of the Habitus

The model of the short circuit suggests that the graphic design habitus is an insular affair that comprises elements of production (labor performed within the design studio) *and* consumption (e.g. leisure activities and lifestyle choices). I have also made the argument here and elsewhere (Soar 1996, 2000a, 2002a) that the primary audience for the creative output of the intermediaries, including ad creatives and designers, is the intermediaries themselves.

There is evidence aplenty to support both of these assertions. I will begin, then, with a brief illustration intended to illuminate the consumption aspect of this relationship, and then move on to the production side.

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In the course of my research I met a couple who run their own design business; they are partners in both senses of the word. Having already had very successful careers in New York City, they moved out some years ago, and now live with their young children in a self-described "Bauhaus box": their work studio is a huge rectangular building with very high ceilings that was built by a Modernist sculptor of modest repute in the mid C20th. Their own living quarters are attached to the studio, which sits in a wooded area in the depths of rural New England.

Another example: a young designer with a considerable reputation, who lives and works in a city in the Northeast, had, when I met him, just bought an elegant, period house in a favorable neighborhood. The second floor is the studio - with his wife's office to one side - and upstairs is their living quarters. Another, highly celebrated young designer works, along with two or three employees, out of his own loft space in Manhattan: floor to ceiling windows, an open spiral staircase, stunning rooftop views. (When I lived in London, I had a room in an apartment that had recently been vacated by one of the partners in an internationally known graphic design consultancy with offices in London, New York and Los Angeles. It included a small work studio, was two blocks from the design company's head office, and had just been prominently featured in a coffee-table book on fabulous apartments.)

The basic point I am making here is that these living and working spaces - although not necessarily typical - are a physical manifestation of the interplay between cultural production and leisure/consumption (and not merely because they exhibit an acute degree of attention to building materials, furnishing and lighting). These particular designers have developed lifestyles in which the formal boundary between these notionally separate spheres is significantly blurred. This had even become a marketing strategy in its own right in the 1990s, with the widespread practice among property developers in many cities of remodeling and compartmentalizing old warehouse spaces and marketing them as "live/work studios." (My own recollections of life in Vancouver,

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Canada, in the early- to mid-1990s suggest that those who ultimately bought these kinds of spaces might well have *aspired* to the creative lifestyle associated with the cultural intermediaries, but were actually more likely to work in financial services. Of course this speaks volumes about the self-identification of intermediaries as style-setters: any commodity that declares itself widely and publicly to be typically suitable for an intermediary is clearly and instantly *outre*.)

On the production side, then: aside from the bulk of their day-to-day work, designers - whether operating as individuals (freelancers or one-person studios), small studio partnerships, or in larger firms - habitually produce pieces of design (sometimes called 'vanity pieces') to give away as promotional items, often to other intermediaries. These tend to reflect the personal interests and creative impulses of the designers concerned, unfettered by the usual functional constraints associated with their regular clientele. Examples include: the fabled Christmas gifts produced by the New York firm M&Co, headed by the late Tibor Kalman, some of which, like their range of wristwatches with quirky face designs, became retail items (see Farrelly 1998); the sought-after calendars designed by the small London-based partnership of Trickett & Webb; a pack of playing cards featuring past design jobs produced by Modern Dog in Seattle; the Pentagram Papers - an ongoing series of small booklets exploring ephemeral subjects such as architectural detailing, and so on. Then there are the 'vanity' books produced by individual designers or design firms that gather together past triumphs, and which can often be found on other designers' bookshelves. Recent examples include *Tibor Kalman: Perverse Optimist* (Kalman *et al.* 1998); Milton Glaser's *Art is Work* (Glaser 2000); *Sagmeister: Made you Look* (Hall & Sagmeister (2001); and *The Art of Looking Sideways* by Alan Fletcher (Fletcher 2001).

There are also ways in which the very tools of design have been designed by well-known designers. The magazine *Emigre* promotes and sells the work of many typeface designers, but also includes t-shirts, posters, and CDs designed by the

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magazine's editor - the designer Rudy VanderLans. (While *Emigre* was, until recently, also an important source of design writing, it has just reinvented itself around the promotion of new music CDs.)

An indispensable feature of most design studios are paper samples: swatchbooks sent out by various paper mills, and conceived to provide useful information on the weight, texture and printing characteristics of various stocks. These have also become a source of intrigue and entertainment, as their basic function has been augmented with eclectic clip art, fanciful design concepts, and even historical studies of design. A key figure in this genre is Charles S. Anderson, a Minneapolis-based designer whose reputation seems to have sprung, at least in part, from his design of paper samples, swatchbooks and posters for the French Paper Company.

To dramatize my point: Want a new CD to play in the studio? How about the new Lou Reed or Rolling Stones (each one cleverly designed by Stefan Sagmeister)? Or the latest offering from the reclusive band Honey Barbara, free with/as the latest issue of *Emigre*? These examples are quite aside from the flood of awards programs, posters and annuals that accompany membership in the Art Directors Club, and the American Institute of Graphic Arts, and the American Center for Design. These annuals are often designed by notable, guest designers - effectively making them books about, of, and *in* design. Examples include the British D&AD (Design & Art Direction) awards annual, designed in 1988 by star packaging design company Lewis Moberley, and the AIGA annual *365*, designed by Jennifer Sterling in 2001. In cases such as these, the annual becomes both document and designed (hence doubly desirable) artifact[20].

In sum, then, it can be seen that the operation of the short circuit serves to bolster the graphic design habitus as a notional realm quite apart from the ostensible

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[20] One might also include the Sept/Oct 2001 issue of *Adbusters*, guest art-directed by the young-and-famous British type designer Jonathan Barnbrook - not least because *Adbusters* has for some time been courting graphic designers as its very own revolutionary avant-garde.

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service function of the design business *per se*. This creates a discursive space - to use Blauvelt's phrase - that can support and even sustain a variety of themes, some of them trivial, others of them poignant or culturally and politically informed. It is also a resolutely *insular* space that remains, for the most part, hidden from public scrutiny - but is, in no small degree, the lifeblood of the graphic design community.

Education, Professionalism, Taste

The celebrated septuagenarian designer Milton Glaser has long had a reputation as an astute observer of graphic design, particularly in terms of business practices and education. He continues to work as a designer and illustrator of books, magazines, posters and interiors, and has taught at the School of Visual Arts since the early 1960s.

Glaser has recently made some astute comments about the nature of art education:

> At art schools, which are usually divided between the fine arts and the applied arts, a peculiar process begins. Those students who select design as their major are perceived as having 'sold out,' that is, of having exchanged their higher calling for commercial reasons. They are shunned and humiliated by the fine arts faculty and students....Undoubtedly, status and self-aggrandizing impulses also contribute to this separation. (Glaser 2000, p. 263)

In choosing to pursue a career in graphic design, then, students must immediately adjust to the fact that they will accrue significantly less *institutionalized* and even *embodied* cultural capital in earning their particular degrees than would otherwise be available if they were to choose to be artists. (By inference, those wanting to be advertising creatives - art directors, copywriters - can expect to earn even less of this kind of capital than do designers.)

Glaser has gone so far as to offer a notional "Art Hierarchy" of "roles": "the exact order varies a bit, but those at the top are closest to God and inspire more respect." (Glaser 2000, p. 263) While this is presented in a whimsical and - especially when compared with the sociological rigor of Bourdieu - decidedly *unscientific* manner, it does serve to illuminate the relative levels of cultural capital that inhere in a variety of closely related occupations - at least according to the lore of the cultural intermediaries:

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PAINTER
ARCHITECT
SCULPTOR
ARTIST-CRAFTSMAN
CITY PLANNER
INDUSTRIAL DESIGNER
GRAPHIC DESIGNER
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT
INTERIOR DESIGNER
BOOK DESIGNER
EDITORIAL DESIGNER
ADVERTISING DESIGNER (ART DIRECTOR)
CRAFTSMAN
COMMERCIAL ARTIST

Of the last entry, Glaser notes: "It's true that many of the roles can be subsumed by the phrase commercial artist, but if you describe yourself that way, you go right to the bottom of the list." (Glaser 2000, p. 263)

Among designers themselves, it is Glaser's 'classic' art training, including a formative period as a Fulbright scholar in Italy working alongside the artist Giorgio Morandi (Helfand 2001a), that is often invoked by design writers, fans, and by Glaser himself, when the opportunity arises. When commenting on recent efforts to improve the level of social responsibility among designers (see Chapter 4) - and indeed during at least one of his classes[21] - he has been quick to invoke historical references that, for Glaser, provide the background knowledge necessary to foster a full understanding of design's formative influences. In other words, he readily displays the *social* and *embodied* cultural capital accrued during a lifetime's achievements in the profession, and which distinguishes him from those who only have, or are in the process of earning, *institutionalized* cultural capital via their college degrees. (Glaser's own pedigree is often telegraphed as a list of specific pieces of design ("design classics"): the "I♥NY" logo, the poster of a silhouetted Bob Dylan with rainbow locks of hair, magazines such as *New York*, *Audience*, and *EROS*. In some ways they become not merely a shorthand way to identify a designer, an answer to the perennial question "What has he/she

[21] I was a participant in Glaser's popular summer workshop in graphic design at the SVA in 1999.

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done?", but also the visual/cultural personification of that designer. In other words, for a designer to see "I♥NY" on a t-shirt or a shopping bag is immediately to invoke the name of Glaser.)

The ads in the design press that greet prospective participants for his annual summer workshop center on a photographic portrait of his smiling face and the word "GLASER." The list of (surprise) guest speakers during the workshop reads like a 'who's-who' of celebrity intermediaries. The year I took the workshop, the participants were mostly college-age, and mostly women. The older members of the class had either been working in design studios as staffers or freelancers for some time, or had their own businesses. Some students had traveled from Europe and Latin America to take the five-day class; they struck me as a whole as fairly, to exceedingly, affluent. We all shared an essential commitment to the notion of individual creativity expressible through design, with peer approval utmost in our minds - and a concurrently hazy notion of the subjectivities of the ultimate audiences for our design work.

The *embodied* cultural capital of designers is often evidenced in the conspicuous exercise of taste. While the design efforts of untrained individuals - "desktop publishers" for example - might be dismissed as "obscene" (Meggs 1994), the naïve typographic efforts of anonymous others can just as easily be co-opted and represented as a witty and informed emulation of a commercial "vernacular." A good example here is the "eclectic" interest of Edward Fella, a type designer who has obsessively recorded the variety of lettering used nationwide on store windows, in gas stations, etc., and used these as inspiration for his own type designs[22].

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[22] One story related to me was that Fella had been a typographer working for large ad agencies before going to study at Cranbrook. There he was much amused by classroom references to "the vernacular"; his apparent response was to declare: "I *am* the vernacular!" (Swanson 2002) For more on the politics of the vernacular, see, for example, Ellen Lupton's article *High and Low: A Strange Case of Us and Them?* (Lupton 1992).

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Although designers and design writers in particular are invested in defining design in the broadest terms possible, if only to dramatize its ubiquity, in fact the distinctions between design and non-design are regularly drawn up and thoroughly policed. The proliferation of glossy trade magazines, awards shows and annuals allows designers to continually and collectively define the boundaries of legitimate practice, led by editorial practices of inclusion and exclusion. Since the act of graphic design is also inherently an exercise in style, this process can be understood as the demonstration of *taste*, both in terms of production and reception (and preservation, and emulation).

One design company in particular recently came in for some heavy criticism at a national design conference because it had been advertising its services, in part, as a way to give new products, such as jars of pasta sauce, the look of a brand that had been around for many, many years (*Tibor Kalman vs. Joe Duffy* 1990). While this practice was attacked at the time as being thoroughly disingenuous, it would be hard to distinguish this critique from the accompanying sense that this kind of design solution was simply too kitschy; in other words, *tasteless*, given the particular stylistic preoccupations of graphic design at that time.

Design Culture: From Ritual Journalism to Scholarly Debate

The thematic fixations of most design writing resembles a very busy, multivocal conversation where, it often seems, no-one is quite being heard. Particular issues, concerns and themes recur time and time again, but rarely does the resultant "dialogue" appear to move *forwards*. This is due, in part, to the fact that the majority of this work is comprised of literally hundreds and hundreds of exceedingly short essays, interviews and opinion pieces. These have been culled periodically from the various trade magazines, journals of professional associations, and conferences where they originally appeared, and published in a loosely thematic manner in the *Looking Closer* series (Bierut *et al.* 1994, 1997, 1999, 2002), *Design Culture: An Anthology of Writing from the AIGA Journal of Graphic Design* (Heller & Finamore 1997), and *Design Dialogues*

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(Heller & Pettit 1998). (The four *Looking Closer* books carry between them a total of over 200 contributions.)

The recurrent themes that seem to be raised, defined, redefined, rebutted, raised again, and yet somehow never clearly *debated* (let alone resolved), include: the relationship between graphic design, modernism and postmodernism; the elements of studio practice, either defining or illegitimate; the role of education - often cast as a choice between the acquisition of practical/studio skills from successful designers *versus* the alien "intellectual" terrain of theory and politics; isolated attempts to explicate theoretical concepts of import to design (semiotics, deconstruction, postmodernism); the effects of contemporary design mannerisms (eclecticism, the vernacular), being either liberating or polluting; the relative seriousness with which designers should or do relate to history - such as the appreciation of the history of the profession, the appropriation of historical mannerisms in their work, or the hows and whys of writing design history; identity issues concerning the relative empowerment of, for example, women or African-American men and women in design; issues of appropriation of imagery, be it direct adoptions of various symbols closely associated with gay and lesbian communities, or the uptake of the insignia of the Third Reich by heavy metal bands and skateboarding types; specific, isolated concerns about the under-use of illustration or the over-use of computers, and related typographic abuses; and, finally, the incessant busywork associated with negotiating the relative legacies of famous designers.

A generous way to interpret this *melange* of competing (and at times cacophonous) voices might be to invoke the idea of communication as a cultural ritual (Carey 1988): the habitus of designers is thereby sustained through the routine and repetitive invocation of specific themes. (These essays, interviews, etc., are, after all, plucked from highly visual periodicals in which they have co-mingled with feature articles - "showcases" - on particular designers, design studios or design projects, along

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with advertisements for computer software, paper mills, type foundries and studio equipment.) In this frame, the degree to which debate and ultimate resolution occurs is of minor consequence. At the very least, we should recognize these voices as an intrinsic part of the habitus; if not *consequential*, then at least functional.

While there are certainly isolated exceptions to this general pattern of discourse, research and writing that is generally more thoroughly argued, and offers more in the way of contiguous debate, can be found in more "serious-minded" graphic design venues (especially certain volumes or issues of the periodicals *Eye* and *Emigre*), and in the scholarly journals *Visible Language* and *Design Issues* (collections of articles from the latter are to be found in Margolin 1989, Margolin & Buchanan 1995, and Doordan 1995).

This contrast in approach and purpose is made abundantly clear by the argument laid out by Jorge Frascara in an article called *Graphic Design: Fine Art or Social Science?* (Frascara 1995). Frascara is a designer, educator, and noted advocate of what he terms 'user-centered' graphic design (Frascara *et al.* 1997). He has also served as president of ICOGRADA (The International Council of Graphic Design Associations). In this article, Frascara's key concern is with what he sees as an over-emphasis on visual style, or aesthetics, in design. He strongly questions the canonical status of several designers associated with design's Modernist, European roots, namely El Lissitzky, Kurt Schwitters, and Josef Albers. Citing examples of their work that are visually impactful but of questionable relevance to the product, service, or event being promoted (at least in denotative terms), Frascara argues that although "avant-garde artists made a major impact on the visual development of graphic design...they also raised the importance of their esthetic approach to a point where the communication link with the common denominator they were addressing broke down." (Frascara 1995, p. 46)

As a consequence of its apparent fixation on aesthetics, graphic design "has developed without much theoretical reflection"; it "has evolved into a sophisticated

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practice in a piecemeal fashion...without either the critical apparatus [to be found] in literature or the discussion present in architecture." (Frascara 1995, p. 44) Frascara offers an alternative conception of graphic design as "*the activity that organizes visual communication in society*"(Frascara 1995, p. 46, emphasis in original). His own investment is in design work that is informational in orientation and persuasive in terms of behavior modification, for example public communication campaigns designed to promote traffic safety, or indeed all manner of "instructional and educational materials, graphs, maps, tables, signage systems, graphic symbols and letters" (Frascara 1997, p.15).

For Frascara, then, design should be grounded in social scientific research, including the analysis of competing communications (e.g. car ads), focus groups and questionnaires. This is what Frascara means by "social responsibility" in graphic design, as reflected in his admonition that "*Quality in graphic design is measured by the changes it produces in the audience.*" (Frascara 1995, p. 49, emphasis in original)

Frascara's overall project - consistent in principle with historical precursors such as Isotype (see Lupton 1989; Kinross 1994) and the Graphic Information Research Unit (Reynolds 1979) - provides a sobering contrast to the habitual preoccupations of the design community - which seem almost hedonistic by comparison. That said, Frascara's approach can be criticized on two levels: first, it is clearly not universally applicable (how would one apply his approach to the design of a movie poster or a CD cover?); second, it is resolutely empiricist and moderately functionalist in its outlook. Neither of these paradigms (empiricism; functionalism) currently enjoys unchallenged or unproblematic status in the social sciences; consequently, Frascara's rhetorical opposition of graphic design as *either* "fine art or social science" is muddied by the conflation of his own methods with social science *per se*. Indeed, there are entire literatures that have had sweeping ramifications in the social sciences and the humanities (structuralism and post-structuralism, to name but two) that would provide

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serious challenges to his worldview. To take but one example, Marilyn Crafton Smith has recently observed that, in Frascara's frame, "the activity of decoding is entirely prescribed through the designer's production of the message. The only recourse the audience member is permitted as an 'active participant' is to willingly participate in behavior modification stipulated on someone else's terms." (Crafton Smith 1994, p. 303)

It is clear, however, that design's most apparent preoccupation, as Frascara rightly maintains, is with aesthetic matters. This situation is perpetuated by hiring and promotion practices that grant primacy to aesthetic considerations, be it one's personal portfolio of work and/or one's relative success in "creative" (i.e. aesthetically oriented) design award competitions. That said, the dominant discourse of design is not entirely averse to acknowledging the kind of communication design, or information graphics, that Frascara values. (Although the notion of quality being valorized in these instances, as Frascara might suspect, is likely to have more to do with aesthetics than with measurable change in its audience's outlook, behavior, or beliefs.) In sum, then, Frascara sees his project as having profound consequences for graphic design education:

> the time has come to understand that the education [of] designers cannot be satisfied by the resources of traditional art schools and that several branches of psychology, verbal communication, sociology, computing science, marketing, and other disciplines should be called upon to develop in students the required awareness. *This seems to be the only choice if a theoretical understanding of graphic design is to develop* and if the field is to take on the responsibility for the conception and production of effective and conscientious communications and for the education of graphic designers. (Frascara 1995, p.55, emphasis added)

The statement here concerning theoretical developments is patently untrue: indeed, the current study presents itself as but one alternative choice. Frascara's conception of graphic design depends for its purchase on a resolutely behaviorist understanding of human nature which threatens to reduce the intuitive leaps of creative practice - the sense that something *just feels right* - to an (in)tolerable minimum.

One need not look far to find evidence of designers' concerns with their audiences, quite aside from Frascara's admonitions. For example, the highly respected

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British record and CD designer Peter Saville (whose work has included designs for New Order and Suede) has recently said: "I based the work on my knowledge of the client and the category their music fell into, but more importantly, on what I felt the visual aspirations of the group's audience to be. Those covers were very carefully positioned - they were 'pitched' at a perceived audience" (quoted, from an interview published in 1995, quoted in Wilson 2001, p. 74). As another example, the following excerpt is taken from a statement of purpose for the AIGA's 2001 national conference, abandoned due to the terrorist attacks of September 11 (the conference was ultimately reconvened for March 2002):

> Today, as design becomes less and less about producing artifacts and more about strategic direction, conceiving experiences and authoring content, the role of the designer as a vital force in society is thrown into sharper focus than ever before. Be it socially or politically, locally or globally, for commerce or altruism, in shouts or in whispers, we have the means to make a difference. How and in what ways do we want to use this agency - our individual and collective voice - to effect change? (AIGA nd)

In light of statements such as these, the criticism that design is *only* concerned with aesthetic issues is much harder to defend. Indeed, as the AIGA statement suggests, there are now an increasing number of interventions and activities - perhaps more than ever before - emanating from within the culture of graphic design which hint at the imminent arrival of an as-yet-undefined watershed in its own historical formation. The lack of theoretical grounding and contextualization highlighted by Frascara reflects a certain current of anti-intellectualism within the habitus of graphic design; a sense in many quarters that theories such as semiology and deconstruction are unwelcome strangers. Somehow enigmatic and even alien, they have been circled and prodded with deep suspicion by designers and design writers alike (and taken up in the classroom by design educators with very mixed levels of competence). The next section addresses the variable reception afforded these interventions, which have often been received by skeptics as an affront to the essence of graphic design education and practice, including

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the nurturing of creative intuition, the acquisition of studio skills, and the relative status of designers who teach from these perspectives.

The Fate of Theory in the Habitus of Graphic Design

The eminent designer and teacher Paul Rand wrote, a few years before his death, that: "A [design] student whose mind is cluttered with matters that have nothing directly to do with design...and who is being overwhelmed with social problems and political issues is a bewildered student; this is not what he or she bargained for, nor, indeed, paid for." (Rand 1997, p. 123) Paula Scher, a highly respected designer and partner in the international design consultancy Pentagram, counterposes the notion of "apprenticeship" ("a hands-on process that has produced tangible results" Scher 1997, p. 165) with the introduction of "theoretics": "exclusionary language", the purpose of which she sees as "making more complex the difficult act of explaining graphic design principles to would-be designers." (Scher 1997, p. 165)

It is important to note that Scher's position, at least in this instance, stems from her encounter with a group of "academicians" who, in presenting their ideas about the future of graphic design education, succeeded instead in thoroughly alienating her. "They spoke in jargon I've never used professionally and didn't understand", including, apparently, the complex terminology of semiotics: "some of the educators took great pride in the fact that their schools were breaking new ground in this area. If so, why couldn't any of them make the idea understandable?" (Scher 1997, p. 165)[23]

Contrary to the positions of Rand and Scher, Salchow has stated quite emphatically that graphic design is "not only a job path", but "should be recognized as an innately precious sociocultural field" (Salchow 1997, p. 83) Gunnar Swanson, in an

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[23] Scher's reaction may not be *entirely* unfounded: as Justin Lewis (Lewis 1991) has recently observed, the "semiological literature has remained elusive to most people. The main reason for this is fairly simple: its advocates have written in a style that ranges from the obscure to the incomprehensible." (Lewis 1991, p. 25)

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essay he suggests has been oft-quoted but routinely misapplied, argues for the framing of graphic design education as a liberal art:

> On the whole, design schooling has not helped students become broader-thinking people who can help shape a democratic society. The tools for analysis and insight of many disciplines have broad extra-disciplinary application for understanding the world. The tools of graphic design do not seem to serve much purpose beyond a graphic design career. Graphic design education is not, for the most part, education. It is vocational training, and rather narrow specialized training at that. (Swanson 1998, p. 17)

In framings such as these, criticism might then "occupy a place at the very heart of the education process" (Poynor 1998a, p. 148) which would, at the very least, disabuse practicing designers of the feeling that theoretically informed criticism is pretentious, alienating, and all about "fault-finding rendered in censorious terms" (Blauvelt 1994, p. 198)

Those who betray an intellectually informed approach to the study of design sometimes find themselves having to do much in the way of self-justification. Johanna Drucker, for example, who is also a designer and critic of artists books (see for example Drucker 1995), was recently interviewed for a leading trade magazine about the incursion of theory into design. She said: "I don't think that design needs theory, but I think designers need theory. Everybody should have a course Ideology 101...because I think we are so blind to ways in which we absorb the culture around us. We need to be given the tools for thinking through our relationship to the power structure." (Drucker 1998, p. 140)[24]

Drucker is in fact hinting here at a rancorous debate that continues to preoccupy and polarize art educators. As Susan McKenna describes it, "there is a widely held assumption in art teaching that theory gets in the way of creativity and spontaneity. While all educators must consider the interrelations of theory and practice, in art departments there is an all too frequent dismissal of theory." (McKenna 1999, p. 75) A

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[24] I should add that I was recently invited to speak at an AIGA conference on "the gap between academic-speak and real language" (see Soar 2002b).

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key component of this dichotomy "is the presumption that a skills approach to studio art is not a teaching of theory" - whereas, as McKenna rightly points out, "the construction of meaning is inseparable from the production of power." (McKenna 1999, p. 75)

One of the most prominent ways in which theory and graphic design have come together - for better or worse - has actually been through attempts to use theory as a creative tool. This strategy is most famously associated with the students and teachers at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in the mid- to late-1980s (Lupton & Miller 1994), whose formal experiments with the layering of type and image in experimental compositions ultimately produced an entire genre of graphic design referred to variously as "deconstruction", "deconstructivism", or just "decon" (Lupton & Miller 1994, p. 353). For Drucker, though, "People who work from a theoretical perspective, whether it's in design or the visual arts, often do very stilted, self-conscious work that ultimately is only an illustration of the theoretical position." (Drucker 1998, p. 140) One particular student, identified by one of the co-chairs of the graphic design program (Katherine McCoy quoted in Lupton & Miller 1994, p. 351) as being a key influence in this respect (and currently a prominent designer and design writer) has said: "It was the poetic aspect of Barthes which attracted me, not the Marxist analysis. After all, we're designers working in a consumer society, and while Marxism is interesting as an idea, I wouldn't want to put it into practice." (Jeffery Keedy quoted in Lupton & Miller 1994, p. 352)

Using theory to *analyze* design as a cultural practice - rather than to *produce* design - has only recently become a goal in some quarters. To illustrate: Design educator and historian Victor Margolin has suggested that "there has been no history of design thinking, something that is badly needed" (1998, p. 170) Designer and educator Teal Triggs argues that "As the graphic design profession matures, the scope for critical analysis and evaluation of its history and theoretical discourses necessarily broadens." (Triggs 1995, p. 7) Historian and designer Philip Meggs has also noted that "We...need

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a body of literature relating graphic design to major philosophic concepts." (1998, p. 93) So: the will is there, but to what end?

Graphic Design History and Criticism in the Service of Design Practice

Victor Margolin and Richard Buchanan, both design scholars, display a palpable nervousness about the possibility that designers might view design writing (such as their own) as irrelevant to studio practice, suggesting that, for them at least, the former depends for its ultimate validation on the latter. Teal Triggs, too, suggests that her own edited collection of essays of cultural criticism (Triggs 1995) provides "a variety of ideas and methodologies", and that "a combination of [these] approaches might be considered *when faced with a specific design task.*" (p.8, emphasis added) Triggs is not alone in framing cultural theory and criticism as (ultimately) pragmatic tools for design thinking and practice.

Victor Margolin and Richard Buchanan, both editors of *Design Issues*, are resolute in their promotion of a "radical pluralism" (Margolin & Buchanan 1995, p. xii) as their preferred approach to the study of design, including graphic design. This general position has, of course, been subject to extensive critique (see, for example, Hall1982). As Terry Eagleton has argued, "seeking to understand everybody's point of view quite often suggests that you yourself are disinterestedly up on high or in the middle, and trying to resolve conflicting viewpoints into a consensus implies a refusal of the truth that some conflicts can be resolved on one side alone." (quoted in Walker 1989, p. 37)

Nevertheless, Margolin and Buchanan claim that pluralism "enables us to avoid entrapment in dogma by forcing our attention to features of the world that might otherwise be ignored by doctrines that are conceived too narrowly - as it seems all doctrines eventually prove to be." (1995, p. xii) There is clearly an elision (not to mention a highly convenient teleology) in the logic of this statement: the most immediate inference is that since pluralism can apparently accommodate all positions, it

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cannot be considered doctrinaire or dogmatic. On the contrary, as Walker notes: "A mere accumulation of different perspectives will tend to produce a relativistic confusion....there is a danger that design history could suffer from scholarly eclecticism and become an incoherent ragbag." (Walker 1989, p. 36) Furthermore, as other writers have noted (Hall 1982, Hardt 1992) pluralism cannot provide an adequate account of the structural inequities of power, since, in its own short history, it has been predicated on the idea that we all live in an entirely *functional* democratic society.

Addressing the postwar period in the US, when pluralism held center stage - especially amongst social scientists - Stuart Hall has recently observed that it "became, not just a way of defining American particularism, but *the model* of society as such, written into social science." Hall continues: "If some groups were, unaccountably, not yet fully paid-up members of the consensus club, they were well on the way to integration within it." (Hall 1982, p. 60) The virtue of breadth implied by Margolin and Buchanan might be understood as the result of uncertainty about how to navigate such a new field: an attempt to "cover the bases." It could also be meant as a veiled criticism of more critical positions that - because of their "narrow" focus - are apparently doomed to "dogma." It is altogether unsurprising, then, that Margolin and Buchanan also claim in passing that "ideological differences will take care of themselves." (1995, p. xiii)

Andrew Blauvelt is Design Director at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, and was a student at the Cranbrook Academy of Art during its notable period of experimentation with poststructuralist theories (Lupton & Miller 1994, p. 351). Blauvelt has recently noted that "graphic design history has been constructed in service to the legitimization of professional practice." (Blauvelt 1994, p. 198) More specifically, he observes that it

> has resisted the intrusions and discursions of the theoretical and methodological operations which have been in full force, at least, since the 1960s in the humanities and social sciences. This intense period of theoretical activity ranges from revised conceptions of Marxism, the articulation of various feminisms, the advent of structuralism, the rise of literary criticism and the developments of post-structuralism and deconstruction in particular. (Blauvelt 1994, p. 198)

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In the remainder of this chapter I will be concerned with some of the ways in which a few of these "operations" *have* actually succeeded in informing graphic design practice, if not graphic design history. Principle among these are the "various feminisms" mentioned in passing by Blauvelt, which demonstrate, above all, the importance of theory for the development of practice. While they highlight and even dramatize the interconnections between "work" and the domestic sphere - a key feature of the graphic design habitus - they also provide a substantial *challenge* to it, since it is precisely the enculturated values characterizing this notional, lived space that feminisms have generally sought to challenge. Feminism(s), then, routinely threaten to destabilize the solipsism of the short circuit, by bringing into sharp relief and problematizing the otherwise implicit links that tie the workplace to the home.

Feminist Challenges to the Habitus of Graphic Design

The development of a feminist critique of the values and priorities of graphic design's habitus has, to some extent, been mired by precisely the kind of objections feminist interventions have met in most other venues. The suggestion has been made, for example, that it is merely one among various "causes" (Meggs 1997, p. 229). There has also been a noticeable reluctance on the part of some prominent women designers to identify with the cause of feminism, however liberally it might be defined. There has even been a serial conflation of gender and politics such that "feminist designer" has come to suggest little more than "*female* designer." Of course, gender *is* a crucial issue in design: the vast majority of "vanity" publications - a phenomenon briefly described earlier in this chapter - represent the work of men; the otherwise important books *Nine Pioneers in American Graphic Design* (Remington & Hodik 1989) and *6 Chapters in Graphic Design* (1997) have been chiefly notable - at least with critical hindsight - for being entirely concerned with fifteen *male* designers. Furthermore, it has recently been noted that only in its second edition did Philip Meggs' *A History of Graphic Design* begin to correct its overwhelming reliance on the biographies and design work of men

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(Scotford 1994, pp. 370-371). That graphic design history and criticism are implicitly, and occasionally overtly, sexist is not news; however, it is the *consequences* of a substantially phallocentric, masculinist, and indeed heterocentric discourse that concerns us here, since these biases have had a central role in informing and sustaining the habitus of graphic design.

In what follows, I take Judy Attfield's lead in avoiding a 'corrective' stance that merely argues for the retroactive inclusion of women (Attfield in Walker 1989). Instead I am concerned with the primary characteristics of an ideological critique that challenges the fundamental assumptions and investments of an overwhelmingly masculinist graphic design discourse.

Messing Things Up

Martha Scotford has made a useful distinction between "neat" and "messy" histories of graphic design (Scotford 1994). Neat, or conventional, history, evokes and condenses the bulk of graphic design's legacy as it has so far been actively developed and recorded: "the simple packaging of one [white, male middle-class] designer, explicit organizational context, one client, simple statements of intent, one design solution, a clearly defined audience, expected response" (Scotford 1994, p. 372) Interestingly, Scotford also equates this version with a classic model of mass communication - "sender, message, channel, receiver, no noise" (p. 372) - in sum, a "simplistic history [that] has served the establishment (white, male, business, design and academic worlds) well." (p. 372)

In contrast, Scotford sees "messy" history in very different terms. I quote this explanation in its entirety because it says much about the alternative aspects of the habitus that I want to tease out in this dissertation (Scotford's qualifying comments are also paramount):

> Designers who do not work alone but in changing collaborations; design works which are not produced for national or large institutions but for small enterprises or local causes; design works which are not produced in great numbers and may even be at the scale of a "cottage industry;" design works that may use cultural

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> codes not part of mainstream culture; design work for small and specialized audiences; design work in forms more personal and expressive; design practices organized around family life and personal issues; design that turns its back on mainstream design, etc. I do not mean to suggest that this wholly or exclusively describes women's design activity (much of which is mainstream), only that it describes alternative conditions, many of which are more true of women's practice and conditions than men's. (Scotford 1994, p. 372)

Scotford's alternative, "messy" frame offers a powerful way of assembling and understanding a range of practices that have otherwise only appeared as an incoherent jumble of secondary or peripheral activities. Furthermore, her argument is not entirely without precedent: in 1973, in an essay called 'Some aspects of design from the perspective of a woman designer', Sheila Levrant de Bretteville (de Bretteville 1999) made the following observations:

> As I become increasingly sensitive to those aspects of design which reinforce repressive attitudes and behavior, I increasingly question the desirability of simplicity and clarity. The thrust to control almost inevitably operates through *simplification.* Control is undermined by ambiguity, choice,, and complexity, because subjective factors in the user become more effective and the user is invited to participate. *Participation undermines control.*
>
> The over simplified, the unremittingly serious, the emphatically rational are the consistent attitudes associated with work adopted by major institutions and the men and few women who inhabit them. In the circle of cause and effect, these attitudes are reinforced and reproduced as they are visually and physically extended in our environment. (de Bretteville 1999, pp. 238-239)

de Bretteville's incisive criticisms of modernist design as a patriarchal and "top-down" pursuit, and her commitment to the exploration of social issues through graphic design, would later come to the fore when she was hired, in 1991, to head the Graduate Program in Graphic Design at Yale University School of Art. Some of her predecessors at Yale objected vehemently to her presence, most notably the staunch modernist Paul Rand, who not only resigned in protest, but also encouraged others to do so[25].

This shift in priorities - at least at the educational level - has parallels in other institutions. Lorraine Wild, a designer and educator who has written about the fate of modernism in design, has been a key faculty member in the Program of Graphic Design

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[25] See Rand (1997) for a diatribe written in response to de Bretteville's hiring.

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at CalArts, where she was chair from 1985 to 1991. Katherine McCoy, with her partner Michael McCoy, co-chaired the design department at the Cranbrook Academy of Art for 23 years, steering it through perhaps its most influential period of growth. In her essay *Countering the Tradition of the Apolitical Designer* (McCoy 1994), McCoy argues that "Most of our colleagues never exercise their right to communicate on public issues or potentially controversial content. Remove our freedom of speech and graphic designers might never notice. We have trained a profession that feels political or social concerns are either extraneous to our work, or inappropriate." (McCoy 1994, p. 106)

It becomes apparent, in light of this kind of critique, that the basic calls for more (or less) social responsibility that periodically surface in the design press are unlikely to be even remotely consequential unless they are developed out of politically, culturally, and historically informed perspectives. To illustrate: the recent spectacle of two (male) designers confronting one another at a national design conference over their relative levels of social responsibility appears, at least initially, to be an important moment in the development of the design profession's collective consciousness. The actual substance of the debate, on the other hand, suggests that very little was achieved (and that it perhaps amounted to little more than a proverbial pissing contest). In a subsequent, formal debate (*Tibor Kalman vs. Joe Duffy* 1990), neither combatant bothered (or was able) to historicize, to provide social statistics, or to articulate a broader political position. Most tellingly, perhaps, was an aside by one of the participants about the substance of the invited keynote speaker's talk: "I don't care what Stuart Ewen says; he's not a designer." (*Tibor Kalman vs. Joe Duffy* 1990, p. 71)

This prickly resistance to criticism - the hoary old rhetorical strategy of attacking the messenger - surfaced elsewhere: in his written report on the conference, the eminent graphic design historian Philip Meggs could only sneer that Ewen had delivered "a passionate talk with Marxist overtones. Personally, he cut quite a capitalist image with

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four fancy rings and a lush Italian-designer jacket." (Meggs 1990, p. 115) Lorraine Wild has seen this refusal to engage as endemic to the culture of design:

> Criticism of the commercial abuse of design is always problematic: if it comes from Stuart Ewen, it's rejected because he's an academic; if it comes from [star typographer] Neville Brody, it doesn't count because he's English; if it comes from Tibor Kalman, it's invalid because he is somehow tainted by his own commercial practice; if it comes from Dan Friedman, well "doesn't he design furniture now?"; if it comes from someone like me, it is written off because my practice is not commercial enough. (Wild 1994, pp. 58-59)

Appropriately enough, Philip Meggs has also noted that "[s]ince 1970, the graphic design community overall has become smarter, better educated, and more capable. This is partly due to the design history movement, stronger education programs, and the development of graduate education." (Meggs 1998b, p.95) Michael Bierut has put it more disarmingly: "All you have to do is go back to issues of *Communication Arts* in the 1970s, and graphic design feels like the dumbest fucking field on earth.... zero, zip, nada intellectual content." (Bierut 1998, p.163)

The alternative perspective sketched out in the latter part of this chapter, and informed most tellingly by strands of feminist thought within the habitus of design, constitutes the frame of analysis I will use in subsequent discussions. The themes to be explored - social responsibility, activism, politically oriented work - will be elaborated through field interviews with individuals and groups who describe themselves variously as artists, activists and designers. The underlying goal here is to displace, or at least problematize, the commercial nexus of graphic design, which has had a significantly normative influence - a kind of inexorable gravitational pull - in defining graphic design's habitus. In order to do this, I will take two distinct approaches in the following chapters: the next chapter, Chapter 4, is concerned with describing, exploring and evaluating two "spectacular" interventions (First Things First; culture jamming). In Chapter 5 I concentrate on less celebrated, but rather more numerous, instances that constitute - unlike the moments explored in Chapter 4 - fragments for a specifically

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messy history of graphic design. In each case I will ultimately be interested in teasing out their respective relationships to the conservative orientation of the habitus.

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CHAPTER 4

THE HABITUS AND THE SPECTACLE OF DISSENT

Is it possible to be so uninvolved as to design a political campaign
for a conservative movement one year, a moderate the next,
and a left-liberal the following year without stretching integrity
and credibility? (Winkler 1994, p.41)

Introduction

Recent debates within the design profession about social responsibility and the ethics of professional practice have served to question, if only implicitly, the habitus of graphic design. A core concern in these debates has been the nature of commercial design practice. One such debate has been sparked by the recent reemergence on the design scene of a short, polemical document called the First Things First manifesto (see figure 3.) which calls, in part, for a "reversal of priorities in favor of more useful, lasting and democratic forms of communication – a mindshift away from product marketing." It continues: "Consumerism is running uncontested; it must be challenged by other perspectives expressed, in part, through the visual languages and resources of design."

Concurrently, the last decade has seen an escalation in the promotion of "culture jamming" as a viable form of populist, anti-commercial critique. The venue that has been the most consistently vocal about the promise of culture jamming has been the Canadian magazine *Adbusters.* Published by the Media Foundation in Vancouver, British Columbia, *Adbusters: The Journal of the Mental Environment* is best known for its spoof ads deriding a whole range of ills associated with excessive consumerism and the corporate concentration of media ownership, and its promotion of activities such as Buy Nothing Day and TV TurnOff Week. It was also intimately involved with the reemergence of First Things First. These two moments – the manifesto proper and *Adbusters*' framing of both First Things First and culture jamming – are of interest because they are directly addressed at the intermediaries *by* intermediaries. Most

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significantly, they identify designers in particular as potent agents of positive social change[26].

While interventions such as these suggest that "hamstrung" power (Lavin 2001) is being effectively challenged from within the habitus, I want to interrogate the conflation of spectacle and efficacy in these instances. Indeed, as I have already speculated, these kinds of interventions deserve to be assessed critically: to what degree do they pose a real threat to the underlying orientation of the habitus? Do they merely serve to flatter the self-perception of designers as being involved in a basically decent profession? Is it precisely through grand gestures such as these that political change can be engendered, both at the professional level (i.e. the habitus) and further afield, beyond the confines of the short circuit? How might these instances compare with more modest, theoretically informed interventions, such as those explored in Chapter 5?

First Things First?

The First Things First manifesto is a call for social responsibility that was signed by, and distributed amongst, designers, art directors, and writers on design, through six key periodicals in 1999. It was originally conceived in 1964 as a provisional response to a new social climate characterized by "the high-pitched scream of consumer selling." British designer Ken Garland wrote the first draft during a meeting of the Society of Industrial Artists in London in 1963. The manifesto was then signed by twenty-two individuals, many of them well-known photographers, typographers, designers, and teachers. It received exposure in, for example, *Modern Publicity*, *Design*, and *The*

[26] This is not to discount certain ongoing debates that are often confined to the design community and its most immediate academic counterparts. For example: the marginalization of women (e.g. Buckley 1989; Thomson 1994) and African-Americans (Margolin 2000) in graphic design history; the role of an engaged politics of social activism (e.g. Lupton 1999; McCoy 1994); and, the possibilities for a radically improved professional milieu of social responsibility (e.g. van Toorn 1998; ten Duis & Haase 1999). 1989 also saw the advent of *Dangerous Ideas*, AIGA's third national conference, which ultimately proved to be a factor in emergent debates about social responsibility in graphic design. It featured Stuart Ewen as keynote speaker, but is perhaps best remembered for a heated debate between two well-known designers, sparked by one citing the other's company as an example of dubious business practices (see Brown 1989, and *Tibor Kalman vs. Joe Duffy* 1990).

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Guardian. Garland was also interviewed on television. (For a concise history, see Poynor's essay which often accompanied the new manifesto, e.g. Poynor 1999a, 1999b, and 1999c; also reproduced in Poynor 2001a).

Interest in the manifesto was rekindled when it was republished in its original form in the mid-nineties in *Eye: The International Review of Graphic Design*, *Emigre* [*sic*], and *Adbusters: The Journal of the Mental Environment* (published in England, the U.S., and Canada, respectively). *Eye* republished it in support of an article by Andrew Howard called *There is Such a Thing as Society* (Howard 1994), in which he envisioned a post-Thatcherite future of "partnerships and collaborations in which design is not simply a means to sell and persuade" (Howard 1994, p. 77). *Adbusters* republished the original manifesto because its art director, Chris Dixon, and its editor and copublisher, Kalle Lasn, had seen it in *Eye*. Subsequently, several individuals got together to update it, including Lasn, Dixon, and Rick Poynor, a distinguished writer on design issues and visual communication (and, until recently, a visiting lecturer at the Royal College of Art in London).

In the autumn of 1999, the newly drafted manifesto ('First Things First 2000') appeared in at least six journals, including *Emigre*, *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design*[77], and *Adbusters* in North America, *Eye* and *Blueprint* in the U.K., and, on the European Continent, *Items* (and, much later, *Form)*. It carried Ken Garland's name once more, augmented by those of thirty-two new signatories. In his short article on the history of First Things First (Poynor 1999a, 1999b, 1999c; also reproduced in Poynor 2001a). Poynor states: "The vast majority of design projects - and certainly the most lavishly funded and widely disseminated - address corporate needs, a massive over-emphasis on the commercial sector of society, which consumes most of graphic designers' time, skills and creativity." (1999a, p. 56) He thereby makes a vital distinction between this

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singular, commercial role of graphic design and "the possibility...that design might have broader purposes, potential and meanings." Katherine McCoy, an American design educator and signatory, had earlier expressed the situation thus: "Designers must break out of the obedient, neutral, servant-to-industry mentality, an orientation that was particularly strong in the Reagan/Thatcher 1980s.... Design is not a neutral, value-free process. A design has no more integrity than its purpose or subject matter" (McCoy 1994, p. 111).

The manifesto couldn't fail to make some kind of impression when it was republished if only because it stands in stark contrast to the stock-in-trade of many design magazines. Indeed, part of its critique concerns the intermediaries' apparent obsession with aesthetics and personalities (i.e. design and designers, art and art directors, illustration and illustrators, photography and photographers) – at least as it is endlessly expressed in the majority of design and advertising publications.

The following section reports on a series of personal interviews[28] with prominent individuals[29] carried out in late 1999, some of whom put their names to First Things First 2000.

The Usual Suspects: Interviews with Intermediaries about First Things First

Michael Bierut is a partner at Pentagram, an international design company of considerable standing among design professionals, and is currently president of the

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[27] The AIGA is a professional organization for art directors and designers with a national membership in excess of 14,000. With an administrative center in New York, it has over 40 chapters throughout the United States.

[28] Some of these were originally conducted for an article in the *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design* (Soar, 1999). Permissions were obtained at the time to reuse the material in scholarly endeavors.

[29] My emphasis on distinguished, or 'name', designers presents specific problems, not least of which is the temptation to generalize to the entire membership of AIGA and beyond. Stevens (1998) provides a useful critique of the star system in architecture, in which he suggests that the achievement of distinction has a great deal to do with having the right class background, education, and formative professional connections.

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AIGA. He has also co-edited a number of works which rightly belong in the category of design criticism (Bierut *et al.* 1994, 1997, 1999, 2002; Kalman, Hall & Bierut 1998).

Stefan Sagmeister has a small design company in New York and has produced CD covers for artists such as The Rolling Stones and Lou Reed (see Hall & Sagmeister 2001). He has been featured in various design magazines for his innovative and occasionally shocking work and is a popular speaker at art schools and conferences. His favorite personal aphorism is "style equals fart."

Jessica Helfand runs her own design partnership in Connecticut with William Drenttel, also a designer and past-president of the AIGA. They have only recently moved out of New York City. Helfand has taught at Yale for six years, and has been a writer for *Eye* magazine for four years. She was among the co-editors of *Looking Closer 3: Classic Writings on Graphic Design* (Bierut *et al.* 1999) and has written two essays on Paul Rand (Helfand 1998), one among a small group of (male) designers consistently identified as seminal figures in the history of American graphic design. (During his lifetime, Rand also taught students - including Helfand - at Yale.)

Milton Glaser is another key figure comparable to Rand; he is exceedingly well-known as a designer, illustrator, and educator (see, for example, Glaser 2000). Glaser[30] has taught for many years at the School of Visual Arts in New York and was a partner in Pushpin Studios, a much-lauded company that challenged many of the prevailing trends in graphic design thinking in the 1970s; he now has his own practice, Milton Glaser Inc..

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[30] Glaser has, in the past, taken a principled stand against unethical business practices. See, for example, his orchestrated withdrawal from a design competition organized by Chrysler (Glaser 1997). He had discovered that the car company had a policy of insisting on approving editorial copy in magazines before agreeing to buy advertising in them. Glaser persuaded fellow nominee Steven Heller, and jurors Jessica Helfand and Tibor Kalman, to join in his protest. Kalman, who had won the award the previous year, "offered to give his $10,000 award to charity or to use it to fight publicly this nasty form of censorship."

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Richard Wilde has been chair of the advertising and design programs at the School of Visual Arts in New York since the 1970s. He is a senior vice president at the Ryan Drossman Marc USA ad agency and also runs his own design company.

Bierut was not one of the signatories; he reported that while one of his partners at Pentagram, J. Abbott Miller, had signed the manifesto, another (Paula Scher) found it "elitist and nonsense." (Bierut 1999) Glaser agreed to sign the manifesto only after an earlier draft had been modified: it was "too polemical and not inclusive enough…it basically took a stand and...did not allow for any elasticity in who was admitted into the game. It sort of said 'choose or die'....My feeling about it in general is if you don't give anybody anyplace to go, they don't pay any attention to you." (Glaser 1999)

Bierut made a telling distinction between the framing of the manifesto in *Adbusters* (a "very absolutist view...sort of, sell your soul or bring capitalism to its knees") and his own position: it's "simply asking for a shift in priorities as opposed to a complete disavowal of commercial work." Even with these relatively modest aims in mind, Bierut sensed a certain degree of alienation among many readers of the manifesto largely because of the nature of the list of signatories, whom he referred to as the "usual suspects." In this context, he agreed that the purposes of the manifesto might have been better served by excluding signatures altogether, or at least employing "a broader, more provocative list" of adherents. In sum, he suggested that "It remains to be seen whether that's an exclusionary, elitist position, taken by people who could afford to take it, as opposed to one that actually was tempting [designers] to cross over."

Helfand, in contrast to Glaser, suggested that it is "a call to order: this is not an industry in which you need to purify the practice, but there might be some basic understandings, some general context in which we can define the values we bring to our work." (Helfand 1999) Unlike Bierut, she also thought - somewhat puzzlingly - that having the manifesto signed by a coterie of "usual suspects" (herself included) was actually one of its strengths: "would this thing have gathered strength in numbers if

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fourteen thousand people [i.e. the entire AIGA membership] had signed it? That would have cancelled itself out as a *special thing*." (emphasis added) This word choice suggests, at the very least, an inconsistency of strategy among the signatories - and at worst a somewhat unreflective comment on the relative strength of a political gesture that involves either a handful of celebrity designers or an entire professional membership.

When I raised the possibility that the manifesto was simply preaching to the converted (since in my view advertising, not design, was the real target of the manifesto's scorn), Helfand responded that the kind of posturing in and around the manifesto was "endemic to these kinds of tribal organizations....the [AIGA] tribe gets together...and talks about design." Indeed, she maintained that such activities were functional for anyone who had chosen design as a career: "Years ago when I was a graphic designer at a newspaper and I was the only trained designer on a staff of five hundred journalists" it was "incredibly therapeutic...I loved to go and gather with other designers and know that I was doing things right; there were other people that cared about things." While the AIGA has clearly proved useful to Helfand as a source of support and camaraderie, she qualified this statement by noting that "The degree that that has any impact on culture at large is not so certain." She expressed a hope that the manifesto might reach beyond "the design ghetto" rather than "support[ing] and advanc[ing] this kind of hierarchy and stratification [within the AIGA membership], which may also have cultural precedent in all sorts of organizations."

Glaser characterized the signatories as a "cadre" who must continue to promote the ideas in the manifesto and encourage practical responses if it is to be of any consequence - "otherwise any polemical statement will more or less go by the boards." Glaser's more general view on matters of ethics was that "there is an area of ambiguity about what is harmful, what is not, and so on." Of the manifesto in particular, he said: "certainly I agree with the fundamental issue, which is that one should try to do no

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harm, and to some extent that is the most attractive thing about a proposition of this sort." Glaser was also pointedly philosophical about the role of designers: "If you begin with the premise that what we work at more often than not involves to some degree a distortion or misrepresentation, it is very difficult to be at any point in this spectrum without having sinned....the question really is how to balance the reality of professional life - and earning a living obviously - and one's desire not to cause harm." It remains unclear exactly what Glaser had in mind when he repeatedly invoked the notion of "harm" here; given his track record as a designer and his public pronouncements about the profession in various articles and essays, one might guess that he is simply echoing the sentiments expressed in the manifesto. That is, the principled avoidance of clients with ethically dubious products or business practices; it certainly *doesn't* preclude involvement in singularly commercial activities (e.g. labels and packaging for alcohol; corporate logos; supermarket interiors and signage). In this sense, Glaser's expectations regarding "harm" are relatively modest.

Sagmeister suggested that one could distinguish between individuals for whom "design plays a very crucial role in their life" and those for whom it is simply a nine-to-five occupation (Sagmeister 1999). The former group was typified by the signatories of First Things First and Sagmeister himself: "I think it's great. If I'd been approached I'd definitely have done it, I would have signed it too....Why would you want to be part of this incredible machinery that produces this amount of unbelievable junk?" Sagmeister's identification was with the "gist" of the manifesto; in his elaboration of this point, it became clear that the "junk" to which he referred is actually badly conceived and executed design work - comparable, perhaps, to advertising 'clutter'. During his well-attended talk at the AIGA conference in Las Vegas in 1999, he

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attributed this "fluff" to a lack of political or even religious conviction on the part of designers[31].

The Las Vegas event, the AIGA's eighth biennial conference, was attended by around 3,200 people, including 300 students. Bierut was charged with providing the closing comments for the event and, in light of this experience, he testified to the sheer range of responses to the manifesto that he had encountered within the first few weeks of its reemergence. Further, he noted what he called the "inverse relationship" between the aesthetic theme of the conference ('America: Cult & Culture') and the ascetic tone of the manifesto. He also anticipated that the cumulative effect of the recent "design boom" (the result of a strong economy) and the "wretched excess" of Las Vegas itself might give designers pause for reflection. For this reason especially Bierut thought that the manifesto's appearance (particularly in *Adbusters*) was "really interesting, really provocative and perhaps extremely timely." Bierut praised *Adbusters* in particular for "see[ing] design as an active tool in creating social change." This he compared favorably - at least in principle - to the AIGA membership's aspirations, which he characterized as a "universal" desire to have "normal people" and the "business community" alike "know and care about design; to understand what it is and to know that it's important."

In interview, both Helfand and Bierut cited specific instances in their own day-to-day work that served to illustrate the difficulties of ethical practice: Helfand complained bitterly about the excesses of the marketers she works with:

> I'm sitting with thirty-five people in a conference room, and with a tremendous budget, and a tremendous amount of work and a tremendous set of expectations, and people aren't referred to as audiences, they're referred to as 'eyeballs'! How reductive and dehumanizing can that be? And yet, that's what they're thinking about: leveraging the knowledge

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[31] Sagmeister noted, approvingly, that the designer of the much-lauded film titles for the movie *Seven* (1995, Dir. David Fincher, New Line Cinema) is a born-again Christian. He felt that the designer's "very strong view on evil...[was] a point of departure....I'm not a religious person but it...showed me that he has a strong backbone...and that's where it comes from."

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> they can get from market research to then go out and build their brand and get people to buy stuff....I think designers have to think carefully about the role they play in that mix.

Bierut was remarkably candid about his own company's activities, noting that Pentagram has worked for "all the big bad ones", as identified in what he called *Adbusters*' "litany of must-to-avoid" companies, including Nike and Disney. He highlighted the ethical dilemmas of "dirtying oneself in the muddy ponds of commercial practice" by repeating an anecdote he had shared with the audience at the AIGA conference about one of his "most worthy" clients. According to Bierut, the Brooklyn Academy of Music has "bravely put on interesting avant-garde performances", "championed free expression, and really advanced the cause of culture...as well as reaching out to their community....they've been great citizens of Brooklyn." He added: "they're a fantastic client....they're a pleasure to work with, I'm very proud of the work I've done for them, and their biggest sponsor is Philip Morris." Bierut then asked the pointed question, "am I advancing the arts in America? Am I helping the underprivileged, arts-starved, and culture-starved Brooklyn community, or am I furnishing the ugly face of the makers of a product that kills thousands and thousands of people?"

Glaser anticipated this kind of conundrum when he noted that

> designers *per se* are usually in a very weak position in regard to what they do; they don't make the determinations, they don't decide what is to be sold, they don't decide on the strategy or the objectives very often. They are, to a large extent, at the end of a long process where these essential decisions have been made by others....Designers have to recognize that their role has become...a mediation between clients and an audience, where they act more like telephone lines than they do like initiators.

Glaser suggested that it is through this kind of realization that designers can come to a more grounded epiphany about the potential harm - or good - they can effect through their work practices. Helfand echoed the view that designers' hands are increasingly tied: in reference to her particular interest in ethical issues surrounding

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design and new media (including the development of websites, CD-ROMs, etc.) she said: "the rules are being rewritten, but not by designers....we're getting pushed into these roles where we're meant to visualize some fleeting information...giving form to content that's not thought through in any meaningful way."

When asked if he felt some sense of *deja vu*, given his vast experience in the field - Glaser is a septuagenarian - he observed that

> at the end of every century in human history - not to mention the millennium itself - there's been this sense that the world is used up, that things have gone wrong, that the wrong people are in power, and that it's time for a fresh vision of reality....it's linked in some way to the Arts and Crafts movement, the Viennese Secession, to Dadaism. All of these desires to clean up the act and to basically produce art or design that is socially responsible. Of course that occurs with great regularity, and that gets subsumed into the needs of the larger culture, to produce things to sell and to buy.

Was this any reason not to react to the manifesto?

> No, I don't think it makes it any less important. It actually shows a sense of historical continuity...what gets lost when people don't pay attention to history. But it *has* to be said, because things have reached a point where, if it isn't said, all you can look forward to is an increasing lowering of human standards and sense of human community. This feeling that you could do anything to an audience as long as it sells the goods is oppressive.

Relative Sinners: Intermediaries on Advertising vs. Design

While Helfand, for example, saw First Things First as a community-building exercise for a business that did not need to change substantially, others, most notably Glaser, were more candid about the inevitability of "sinning" at some stage in one's career. Glaser also noted that "people in the advertising world certainly represent a more visible and more forceful expression of these ideas than what we find in the so-called world of design." Indeed, advertising was repeatedly targeted, even scape-goated, for the ills identified in the manifesto - much to the frustration of Richard Wilde, for one. At the time I spoke to him, Wilde was only vaguely aware of the manifesto. After I sent him a copy, he remarked that while it looked good at first glance, ultimately he felt it was "truly naïve" and "high-handed." (Wilde 1999) He defended advertising's record

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by pointing out that, unlike designers, "American ad agencies contribute 10% of their combined output to social issues, in the form of PSAs - or Public Service Announcements."

As an indirect response to Glaser's suggestion that designers "do no harm" Wilde said: "who's to say what's good and what's not good? From where I sit I could take most any product and find real flaws." Indeed, Wilde seemed to be the most conversant of my interviewees with regard to specific environmental and political issues beyond the immediate purview of design and advertising practice. Examples he readily cited included products made overseas through the use of exploitative labor practices; the use of carcinogenic chemicals to treat fruit and vegetables; aerosols; and, the production of leather goods. Ultimately, however, Wilde saw the strength of the manifesto in the fact that it "opens up the question and gets people thinking and it gets their blood churned a little bit and it opens up debate; and debate on this is probably the single most important thing."

According to First Things First's signatories, it is advertising's "techniques and apparatus...[that] have persistently been presented to us as the most lucrative, effective and desirable use of our talents." Andrew Howard has faulted the original manifesto, and Ken Garland in particular, for making unnecessary concessions to advertising. When Garland declared in a 1964 interview that "[w]e are not against advertising as a whole" because "[t]he techniques of publicity and selling are vital to Western society" (quoted in Howard 1994, p. 75), Howard suggested "that what Garland is arguing for is the same cake, sliced differently", rather than "a different cake altogether" (1994, p. 75). As it turns out, Garland has acknowledged that he has, over the ensuing years, "had some qualms about the pragmatic flavour of that part of the manifesto" (1994, p. 3), but maintains that the original concern of First Things First was "spending priorities rather than social consciousness". (1994, p. 3)

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Glaser thought that advertising people must be brought to the table although, for him, "they have the most to lose." However he also maintained that designers shouldn't feel ethically superior to ad people or "removed from the fray", since the issues for both camps are the same (never mind that, for designers, this "is somewhat obscured by our loyalty to beauty, so called"). Bierut emphasized his belief that there is no way to make a clear-cut distinction between "right" and "wrong" in the design business and, further, that it is much harder to make ethical decisions in design than it is in advertising - mainly because the motives of the latter are, for him, singularly oriented towards commercial persuasion. In contrast, Helfand thought that "intrinsically there's nothing wrong with advertising" - although she did feel that "marketing might be [the enemy]." Here she included activities such as market research, focus groups, and brand-building.

In contrast to design, there seems to be something resolutely furtive or even confessional about the notion of ad people taking the time to criticize the workings of their own profession. While the rhetoric of advertising speaks tirelessly of subversion, resistance and revolution, its near-universal complicity in supporting the most fundamental tenets of consumption as a component of capital accumulation perhaps serve to ensure that its practitioners remain - overtly at least - committed believers. A clue to this distinction lies in the paucity of venues for critical debate about advertising for its practitioners. There are isolated exceptions (e.g. Gossage 1986; Lury, 1994; Helm, 2000) but perhaps because of the education and training that ad people generally receive, the critical insight offered by such rare contributions is most often particularly limited. Further, although the ad business has long supported the creation of public service announcements (PSAs) for various interest groups – drunk driving, anti-drugs, etc. – these rarely, if ever, take the messages or methods of advertising itself to task.

A public debate about First Things First was organized by the AIGA and held in New York in April 2000. Among the invited panelists were Jay Chiat, cofounder of Chiat/Day, one of the most successful, and high-profile American ad agencies of recent

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years. He was unabashed about his own track record – Chiat/Day's emergent reputation was due in no small part to its work for Nike – and seemed indifferent to the palpable sense of urgency both at the debate and conveyed in the manifesto.

Another panelist, Kevin Lyons, was recently declared one of a "bumper crop of remarkable young talents" in *ID* magazine's Forty Designers Under Thirty feature in 2000. He had declared in interview with *ID* that graphic design "is a true guerilla art form"; if he wasn't a designer, he'd be "Doing guerilla activity of a different sort." Further, he claimed that his work is "informed by culture and politics." Lyons' clients include Nike, Stüssy and Urban Outfitters. At the debate, Lyons recounted how he had worked on campaigns conceived to persuade inner city youth to choose to buy Nike shoes. While this had the ring of a confession, his tone was anything but. Indeed, there seemed to be something altogether absent in the contributions of Chiat and Lyons; a palpable gap between the earnestness of the manifesto and the possibility that their disclosures might somehow implicate them as targets of its criticism.

Fall-out from First Things First

First Things First has provoked a fair range of responses from "name" designers and art directors. While sharing a largely unspecified commitment to social responsibility, reactions were varied among these intermediaries as to the perceived severity of the situation as described in the manifesto. Further, they seemed to feel that, at the limit, designers either had their hands tied or were simply innocent of the criticisms leveled at them (or were significantly less culpable than ad folk). More telling, perhaps, was the way in which the "usual suspects" policed one another's level of involvement: in one or two cases it seemed that the politics of inclusion or exclusion as a signatory might actually outweigh the import of First Things First itself.

After his interview with me, Bierut took a decidedly negative public position on the manifesto. In a recent article (Bierut 2000) in *ID* magazine, he set about criticizing the signatories of the manifesto partly because - with a few exceptions - they "have

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specialized in [designing] extraordinarily beautiful things for the cultural elite, not the denizens of your local 7-Eleven." (Bierut 2000, p. 76) Referring to this generally defensive stance, observer and signatory Rick Poynor has said:

> "This reluctance to face up to the real issues being raised typified responses to First Things First. One line of attack taken by its critics was to zero in on the thirty-three signatories themselves, making wild generalisations about a 'professional elite' who supposedly concentrate on rarefied projects for the cultural sector and have little experience of the commercial work they snobbishly condemn. In reality, many of the signatories have years of commercial experience." (Poynor 2001e, pp. 144-145)

Remarkably enough, in 2001 Bierut reversed his stance completely and declared that, because he could now appreciate the virtue of the manifesto, he had been moved to provide his support after all. (Poynor 2001e, p. 149)

Prior to this turnabout, Bierut's glib reaction had been characteristic of a tit-for-tat dialogue that has characterized much of the ensuing debate over First Things First. It is generally difficult to gauge whether individual responses have been borne of a genuine commitment to further discussion or have merely been symptomatic of a kind of turf war played out in the pages of design magazines. To illustrate: two of the three responses to Bierut's article published in the letters page of the next issue of *ID* were from the editors of other design magazines. One was Steven Heller, editor of the *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design*; the other was Rudy VanderLans, editor of *Emigre*. Both were highly critical of Bierut's argument, with VanderLans accusing Bierut of working to "maintain the status quo." (Heller and VanderLans were among the thirty-three signatories.)

The letters page of the October/November 2000 issue of *Adbusters* carried a brief contribution from David Berman, National Ethics Chair of the Society of Graphic Designers of Canada. He reported that, after "a passionate discussion" centering on the manifesto at a recent international design conference, "the delegates unanimously agreed to sign the manifesto." Further, "Unlike past signatories, this group only agreed to sign on if it were attached to a commitment to meaningful action. Each delegate

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agreed to perform at least one socially responsible project in their professional work this year, and we are setting up a way for publicly collecting and publicizing these acts as an inspiration for others." (Berman, 2000) Berman was also chiefly responsible for the unprecedented development and implementation of a code of ethics for the Ontario chapter of the Society. Designers can now sit an exam to become Registered Graphic Designers (or "RGD"), and Berman has high hopes that the initiative will be taken up by other chapters across Canada. In interview, Berman also said that the initiative has received demonstrable support from the Ontario government, to the extent that it has begun specifying in some of its advertised contract work for the Province that only RGDs need apply.

Responses to First Things First have also been divided along generational lines. The public debate about the manifesto organized by the AIGA was held at the Fashion Institute of Technology, and was attended by many students – some of whom expressed puzzlement and even dismay at the panel's responses during the question and answer period. Discussions with educators at several educational institutions confirmed the degree to which young people have readily identified with the manifesto's criticisms. Elizabeth Resnick, for example, is a professor in the graphic design program at Massachusetts College of Art, or MassArt. She also has a design practice and has long been an active member of the Boston chapter of the AIGA. In an interview she was emphatic in noting that the reemergence of First Things First was highly significant for her students; that it strongly resonated with many of their formative concerns (Resnick 2001).

First Things First most likely helped to set the stage, and the theme, for the AIGA's most recent national design conference. *Voice* was finally held in Washington DC in March 2002, after a postponement from the previous September due to the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. In addition to a whole entourage of distinguished speakers ("the critical thinkers and practitioners who shape contemporary

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visual and political culture" AIGA nd), tours of local design studios, and a closing party at the Library of Congress, the schedule also included lobbying expeditions - also a direct result of the AIGA's initiative to involve itself in the redesign of voting ballots in the wake of Florida's Presidential election fiasco.

So, while the manifesto might be faulted for being long on polemic and short on substance, it has clearly had *some* influence in setting the agenda for current debate within the design profession. That said, it is also apparent that the intervention was not remotely grounded in critical theoretical terms. (An approach such as this would, for example, allow us to understand Glaser's comments regarding designers' very limited agency as a matter of ideological constraint, rather than mere professional frustration.) We must also question the efficacy of an approach that valorizes the "top-down" endorsements of celebrity designers and commentators; indeed, we remain largely ignorant of how the manifesto has been received (if at all) by the bulk of graphic designers in North America.

<u>The Lasn-Dixon Line: Intermediaries as Revolutionaries</u>

One of the strongest advocates of the manifesto has been the Media Foundation, through its publication *Adbusters*. The magazine, which has historically fostered a blend of consumer and environmental activism, carries little or no advertising; in fact, it has become particularly well-known for its spoofs of well-known ad campaigns ("Absolut Impotence"; "Joe Chemo"). Kalle Lasn, the editor of *Adbusters* (and cofounder of the Media Foundation) has recently elaborated a political agenda - both in the magazine and in book-form (Lasn 1999b) – which he describes as "culture jamming."[32] It is through his elaborations on this strategy, and his utilization of the First Things First manifesto in

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[32] According to Rick Poynor, the term was "coined in 1984 by the American experimental music and art collective, Negativland, to describe billboard liberation and other forms of media banditry." (Poynor 1998c, p. 39) See also Dery 1993; Poynor 1998b; Lasn 1999b; and, Klein 2000. A rich prehistory of culture jamming can be found in the activities of the Situationists (their notion of 'detournement' being a favorite invocation of *Adbusters*); proto-DADAist groups and performances (eg Cate & Shaw 1996); and, the ancient cultural trope of the trickster (Hyde 1998).

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particular, that Lasn continues to make overtures to both graphic designers and ad creatives:

> We are going to be the first activist movement to be launched by print ads and TV spots, by putting up billboards and by this more visual image-oriented thrust. In that sense, graphic artists are the cutting edge of what we are doing. Not only that, but I've found that graphic artists are in some sense the perfect people to launch a revolution because they have an openmindedness that I don't find in other professions. Their skills can be used to sell soap, sneakers and Coca-Cola, but they can also be used to change the world. More and more visual artists are realizing this. (Lasn in Poynor 2000: 98.)

As part of its ongoing, open invitation to readers to join in the cause of culture jamming, the Autumn 1999 issue also carried a call for entries for a "Creative Resistance Contest": "If you're a designer, filmmaker, ad agency team or digital artist, you have the skills to affect the issues that concern you. Adbusters needs your help to sell ideas, not products. Send us your best social marketing concept - storyboard, video, poster, print-ad, parody, installation or performance art piece. Create. Resist. Contest." (*Creative resistance contest* 1999)[33]

In gestures such as this, *Adbusters* may be acting as a bridge between critics and disillusioned ad people, at least according to its editor: "there is a huge percentage of graphic artists within the advertising industry who are profoundly unhappy with their industry's ethical neutrality. Given the chance they would dearly love to be using their skills for other purposes, and these people finished up being very powerful allies for us" (quoted in Poynor 1998c, p. 40).

In interview with me, Lasn was full of enthusiasm for his project: with First Things First he hoped to "launch a vigorous debate about why designers are sitting on the fence, and why they don't recognize the fact that they are actually foot-soldiers for

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[33] The results of the contest, published in the Spring 2000 issue, included a version of the Stars & Stripes in which the stars were replaced with corporate logos. Designed by a student at the Pratt Institute, this version of the flag has now become a staple of *Adbusters*' own promotion of culture jamming. Among the other award winners drawn from a reported three hundred entries was an ad about homelessness that read "You have 83 Beanie Babies. She has no place to sleep at night."

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consumer capitalism.... Designers are supporting a system that is unsustainable." For the AIGA conference in Las Vegas, Lasn and Dixon recruited Jonathan Barnbrook, a well-known experimental typographer, to design a 48 ft. billboard poster that was displayed outside the conference. Quoting designer Tibor Kalman[34], it read: "Designers: Stay away from corporations that want you to lie for them."[35]

For Lasn, then, graphic design affords its practitioners the latitude to explore their dissent openly; so-called political graphics can, at least nominally, be accommodated as a legitimate form of design expression - as the *Adbusters* feature attests. (Tellingly, it is *Adbusters* alone that specifically refers to First Things First as a "Design" manifesto.) It must also be said that Lasn, a former documentary film maker, and Dixon, the magazine's art director, are intermediaries in the rare position of being able to lead with their consciences: rather than supplement business-as-usual with prosocial gestures, they have been able to dedicate their entire efforts to media activism.

In *Adbusters 26*, the issue that preceded the relaunch of First Things First, Lasn wrote a scathing attack in which he elaborated on his conviction that "culture jamming will become to our era what civil rights was to the '60s, what feminism was to the '70s, what environmental activism was to the '80s." In *The New Activism*, he declared that "we're not feminists"; "we're not lefties"; and, "we're not academics" (excerpted from Lasn 1999b). Among the shortcomings of these dubiously contrived - and apparently mutually exclusive - cohorts, were such crimes as "communications professors who tell their students everything that's wrong with the world - and nothing about how to fix it."[36] While framing "feminism" as the defining political movement of the 1970s, Lasn

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[34] Kalman, who died in 1999, was well-known in the design community for his outspoken views on design and social responsibility.

[35] Reproduced in, among other places, Poynor 2001a, p. 173.

[36] The fact that *Adbusters* has also featured articles by Professors Stuart Ewen, Mark Crispin Miller, and Sut Jhally - not to mention *homages* to the trenchant critiques of Barbara Kruger and *Ms.* magazine, seems altogether puzzling.

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also declares that culture jamming is entirely distinct from, perhaps even in opposition *to*, it. The rhetorical gesture is clear: a series of ill-defined references to some of the most vital political movements of the late C20th become nothing more than a contradictory straw figure that somehow stands in opposition to the ascendant radicalism of culture jamming.

When Edward Herman, co-author with Noam Chomsky of *Manufacturing Consent* (Herman & Chomsky 1988), wrote in to complain that "Lasn's effort to make culture jamming into a general philosophy and program of activism...is intellectually and programmatically pitiful" (Herman 1999, p. 12), this was Lasn's accompanying reply - which is worth repeating *verbatim*: "Once again, a traditional lefty describes as 'action' such efforts as 'thinking very hard' and writing proposals that others, presumably, are expected to carry forward. But what have you done lately besides talk and write, Mr. Herman? Would the left be in so sorry a state if it had permitted itself more action - even if 'based on outrage'?" (Lasn 1999a, p. 12)

It is clear by now that the degree of intellectual insight offered by Lasn is high on hubris and thin on substance, as this instance of intemperance demonstrates. Although Herman's political position is not clearly articulated in his open letter to Lasn, it is very much in evidence in the substantial body of critical research he has helped to develop on the political economy of the media in the US. Lasn, by contrast, can claim no such achievement: as someone who trained as an intermediary, he either cannot, or will not, invoke the vast legacy of critical, political theory and research on communication, the media - and even on revolution. The cautionary words of Janet Wolff are particularly apt in this respect:

> The conditions under which art may be effective, politically and historically, are determined both by the nature of cultural production at that moment, and its possibilities, and by the nature of the contemporary society, and in particular of its general ideology....any attempt at political intervention through cultural politics cannot be made in ignorance of these conditions, but must be based on an analysis of the specific relations of culture, ideology and society. *That is why sweeping demands for cultural activism are both meaningless and pointless*. (Wolff 1993, p. 85, emphasis added)

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The Politics of Culture Jamming

In recent years there has been a significant increase[37] in the circulation of *Adbusters* magazine and a concurrent popularization of the term culture jamming. Criticism of these developments has come from the advertising industry (see for example Dignam 2001), from observers on the right (e.g. www.leftwatch.org), and from the left (Soar 2000b, 2002a; Guerrero 2002; www.tao.ca; see also Klein 2000, p. 295).

Naomi Klein, in her best-selling book *No Logo* (Klein 2000) refers to culture jamming as "semiotic Robin Hoodism." (Klein 2000, p. 280) Having discussed many examples and interviewed jammers in various cities across North America (many of whom have jobs or careers as cultural intermediaries), Klein goes on to note that "Ad culture has demonstrated its remarkable ability to absorb, accommodate and even profit from content critiques." (Klein 2000, p. 291) The examples she cites include unsuccessful attempts by ad agency Wieden & Kennedy to recruit politician Ralph Nader, the poet Martin Espada, and even the band Negativland (which originally coined the term "culture jamming"), to feature in their commercials for Nike.

Klein has also discussed the creation of billboard ads in Australia (also for Nike) that are effectively "pre-jammed," that is, made to appear as if they have already been altered, and/or couched in the rhetoric of dissent (see Rebensdorf 2001). Klein continues: "It turns out that culture jamming - with its combination of hip-hop attitude, punk anti-authoritarianism and a well of visual gimmicks - has great sales potential." (Klein 2000, p. 297) With reference to *Adbusters*, and Kalle Lasn in particular, she says: "adbusters are susceptible to a spiraling bravado and to a level of self-promotion that can be just plain silly....There is a strong tendency to exaggerate the power of wheatpaste and a damn good joke." (Klein 2000, p. 295)

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[37] Klein (2000) reports that the magazine "now has a circulation of 35,000 - at least 20,000 copies of which go to the United States." (Klein 2000, p. 286)

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Conclusions

While Klein remains hopeful that jamming is, at its best, an adept political force to be reckoned with, Lasn's editorial strategy in *Adbusters* and elsewhere (Lasn 1999) suggests an enduring faith in a hybrid movement that seems to be devoid of a broader political vision. Indeed, to insist, as Lasn does, on dramatizing a perceived schism between culture jamming on the one hand and feminism, environmentalism and the left more generally on the other (Lasn 1999b), seems altogether counterproductive. It also smacks of precisely the kind of turf war that he suggests has been symptomatic of left politics since the sixties.

Adbusters began life as a decidedly low-budget affair, printed on cheap recycled newsprint, published somewhat erratically, and sporting a look that was more reminiscent of a better quality 'zine than the highly designed, glossy magazine it has since become. As *Adbusters*' look has developed, so has its identification with a notional readership of would-be and current cultural intermediaries (ad creatives; graphic designers; commercials directors; web designers). It has evidently registered in the consciences of some designers through its involvement in the redevelopment of the First Things First manifesto. Other than that, *Adbusters* is perhaps read by designers merely because it's fashionable to do so.

Rick Poynor has said that, "In fifteen years as a design writer, I have never observed anything in the design press to compare with the scale, intensity and duration of international reaction to First Things First." (Poynor 2001e, p. 141) According to my own criteria developed in previous chapters, however, both of these interventions have been short on critical theoretical grounding, long on the pursuit of spectacle, and most vocally endorsed, dominated and discussed by a core cadre of privileged and very successful individuals. (Less than a third of the thirty-three signatories are women; most if not all of the signatories are white; while at least one of the signatories is openly gay, none of them, to my knowledge, has written about their sexual identity in relation to

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their roles as "visual communicators.") Poynor, too, wonders about the real "possibility that designers might work for change from within the system" (Poynor 2001e, p. 149) Drawing on his own knowledge, he comes up with only two examples: Oliviero Toscani and Tibor Kalman, both of whom worked for Benetton; of this work, he suggest that "the results are controversial, highly ambiguous and ultimately inconclusive." (2001e, p. 149)

In a recent essay titled 'First Things Next' (Poynor 2001e) Poynor makes connections between the spirit of the manifesto and Klein's book. (Indeed, Klein joined over a thousand people in signing on to the manifesto via the *Adbusters* website after its initial relaunch.) Poynor notes that

> The design profession has not, in any case, swung around to a *No Logo* point of view, even if the book's incongruous presence in the design book shops lurking among the piles of hot-graphics titles might seem to suggest that it has. In conversation, Klein told me that she was struck by the way in which design people who invite her to speak at conferences often seem to misunderstand *No Logo*. They interpret her criticism of branding as evidence of 'failure to communicate,' and imagine the book to be a wake-up call intended to help them deliver their clients' messages more effectively. (2001e, p. 144)

In the next chapter, then, I focus on a series of interventions that, in contrast to the manifesto and the 'cult' of jamming, are decidedly more modest and contingent. Instead of directing their attention at the normative roots of *their own* habitus (which, as Poynor notes, seems to be a notoriously difficult thing to do effectively) these alternative strategies routinely break out of the short circuit. They do this by attempting to engage an audience above and beyond the graphic design habitus; by reaching out more determinedly into the circuit of culture itself. It is perhaps no surprise that these activities can often be distinguished along lines of gender and sexuality; for example, women and queers are both constituencies who have been forced to develop and elaborate their own critiques of "the specific relations of culture, ideology and society" (Wolff 1993, p. 85) specified by Wolff as a necessary ingredient for effective interventions.

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I begin with the work of WD+RU (Women's Design & Research Unit) in England. Two of the members of this group - Siân Cook and Teal Triggs - put their names to First Things First when it resurfaced. Cook, however, has said in relation to the manifesto, "I don't see how there can be a unifying 'big idea'....There is too much to tackle. But if every designer was part of a 'small idea', maybe concerning single-issue politics or local campaigns, then that would be a start." (quoted in Poynor 2001e, p. 148)

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CHAPTER 5

'SMALL IDEAS': DISSENT BEYOND THE HABITUS

Introduction

In previous chapters I laid claim to the idea that the professional milieu of graphic design constitutes a coherent culture that straddles the notionally distinct realms of work and leisure. Further, I have elaborated a theoretical model - the short circuit - that has enabled me to explore this cultural milieu in terms of Bourdieu's richly conceived notion of the habitus (Bourdieu 1984). My underlying interest has been in the ideological limits to agency in graphic design practice and, in this respect, I continue to rely on Wolff's (1993) argument that structural determinants are themselves enabling. As she notes, to argue otherwise is to imply that there exists an ideal state or space, prior to determination, in which the subject is entirely free of constraints. This is a very powerful theoretical move on Wolff's part, since it encourages us once more to transcend the usual binary oppositions of agency versus structure, voluntarism versus determinism, etc., as discussed in Chapter 2.

In Chapter 4 I investigated two recent and related phenomena (the First Things First manifesto; culture jamming) that, properly addressed, can neither be embraced as fully realized and transformative gestures, nor discarded as superficial parlor games. By the same token, the most energetic and self-regarding claims made in the names of the manifesto and culture jamming (at least in the increasingly codified form promoted and policed by *Adbusters*) must be treated with skepticism, even though the fact that they have contributed to and enabled a valid and consequential critique of contemporary consumer culture is not in doubt. My intention in Chapter 4, then, was to explore with greater certainty the contours and lacunae associated with this generalized critique, via an engagement with some of the key moments and individuals involved in it.

In themselves, the manifesto and culture jamming are commendable and creative responses to the perceived oppressions of the contemporary free market system and the

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associated lack of regulatory control of advertising's incursions into private and public spaces (and its dubious self-defense as free speech); the further concentration of media ownership; the paucity of environmental regulation; and the worrying effects of over-consumption and "hypercommercialism" (cf McChesney 2000). I remain concerned, however, that the efficacy of such interventions is limited by, on the one hand, the manifesto's reliance on a terse, inflammatory, and "top down" rhetoric that has made constructive responses difficult, and on the other hand a largely covert activity such as culture jamming that has only a vaguely defined and articulated politics - and can only ever be reactive. Clearly a distinction has to be made between the issue of "feel good" personal empowerment on the part of signatories, jammers and supporters, and the broader issue of attempting (in vain?) to develop a broader political platform based on "graphic dissent." Perhaps the single biggest weakness in Kalle Lasn's project via *Adbusters* is that he continues to attempt to unify the disparate, context-specific activities of jammers; to rally them under the umbrella of a generalized intervention that lacks precisely the highly personalized and localized kinds of engagement that had come to define culture jamming in the first place (see especially Wolff 1993, p. 85).

In this chapter I turn my attention to a series of decidedly unspectacular initiatives that often exhibit more clearly articulated intellectual and theoretical commitments. This is initially conducted in the manner of a highly selective survey of contemporary interventions and, where appropriate, their historical precursors. Following this discussion I introduce and apply a novel analytic frame, with the intention of assessing the relative merits of these initiatives.

My assertion at this point is that the rather more modest and focused interventions discussed in this chapter nevertheless constitute - in sum - a more substantial challenge to the normative undercurrents of the graphic design habitus. Not least among my reasons for this claim is the fact that their politics are often more clearly

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articulated; concurrently, they address themselves, at least partly, to the world beyond the short circuit.

A Qualification

Many books have been published as catalogs of, or homages to, the work of groups and individuals such as John Heartfield (e.g. Pachnicke & Honnef 1992), Barbara Kruger (e.g. Kruger *et al.* 1999) and the Guerilla Girls (e.g. *Confessions of the Guerrilla Girls* 1995). Still more books thematize their subject matter: McQuiston's *Suffragettes to She-Devils* (McQuiston 1997) is a visual testament to a whole host of graphic interventions related to the women's movement. Her book *Graphic agitation* (McQuiston 1993) casts its net more broadly, taking in the civil rights movement, protests relating to the Vietnam War, and interventions relating to human rights abuses. Jacobs & Heller (1992) address 'protest posters of the Reagan and Bush years'; Crimp & Ralston (1990) gather together posters relating to the AIDS crisis in America (this collection is uncommonly adroit in its textual support of the images).

My concern here is not to discount such publications out of hand, but to take heed of Sontag's admonition that, in focusing almost exclusively on the powerful graphic ephemera associated with certain interventions, we run the (largely inevitable) risk of commodifying and fetishizing these artifacts - particularly when they have been recontextualized into glossy, linear histories. Ironically enough, Sontag's essay was written as an accompaniment to a collection of Cuban revolutionary posters (Stermer 1970), and is all the more remarkable, therefore, because the book's editor decided to keep the essay despite (or perhaps because of) its condemnatory tone:

> However much those who have made this book may like to think of it simply as presenting the poster art of Cuba, to a wider audience than ever before, the fact remains that the Cuban posters reproduced in this book have thereby been converted into something other than what they are - or were ever meant to be. They are now cultural objects, offered up for our delectation. They have become one more item in the cultural smorgasbord provided in affluent bourgeois society. Such feasting eventually dulls all capacity for real commitment, while the left-liberal bourgeoisie of such countries is lulled into thinking that it is learning something, having its commitments and sympathies extended. (Sontag 1970, p. xxii-xxiii)

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While Sontag's concern is principally with the effects of trans-cultural dislocation, my sense is that her argument is still very much valid when considered in the context of political graphics produced, consumed, and reconsumed in the domestic sphere of the US. Moreover, it is entirely fitting when considering the nature of the graphic design habitus which, as I have already suggested, is overwhelmingly fixated on design artifacts: one is far more likely to encounter lavish reproductions of the graphics associated with the kinds of interventions discussed in this chapter than substantive engagements with the political positions they espouse. It is therefore my intention to avoid this pitfall by not concentrating my efforts here on the graphic manifestations of such interventions, so much as the political and personal commitments that informed them.

Design-oriented Interventions: A Brief Survey

There are countless examples of contemporary, ad hoc political interventions that tackle social issues via incisive graphics. Most often, these progressive and activist groups share the common characteristic of being anonymous or semi-anonymous collectives, drawn together around a specific issue or set of issues. These may only be, or have been, functional for very brief periods, either disappearing altogether, or remaining in limbo for extended periods while their founders and organizers work(ed) on other issues (or simply work(ed)).

Broadly speaking, then, groups such as SisterSerpents, Guerilla Girls, Women's Action Committee, WD+RU and Class Action were founded - often exclusively by women - to tackle gender issues relating to reproductive rights, sexism in the art world, negative media representations of women, and the promotion of feminist perspectives in design and education. Guerilla Girls, for example, refer to themselves as the "Conscience of the Art World." One of their most recognizable posters from the late 1980s shows a reclining nude wearing a gorilla mask (a favorite prop during actions and press conferences) alongside the stark headline "Do women have to be naked to get into

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the Met. Museum?" As the accompanying text explains, "Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art Sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female." (reproduced in McQuiston 1993, p. 169; see also *Confessions of The Guerrilla Girls* 1995) Another key poster, circa 1990, has the bold headline "The Advantages of being a Woman Artist"; below this is a list of thirteen points, such as "Working without the pressure of success", "Having an escape from the art world in your 4 free-lance jobs" and "Being included in revised versions of art history" (reproduced in McQuiston 1993, p. 139)

WD+RU has developed an eclectic variety of design projects[38]. Among these is an experimental typeface called Pussy Galore featuring, instead of the alphabet, a series of icons or 'dingbats.' Fifteen examples were reproduced in a recent issue of *Adbusters* (*Design Interventions* 2001), where they were described as "a feminist toolkit to reclaim lost meanings, seize gender stereotypes, dispel myths and explore the power of visual communication." One icon is the word "family" tucked underneath the international symbol for radioactive matter; two of them are speech bubbles, one with the words "bloody useless" inside it, the other with "chatty cathy"; and, another is the word "grrrls" inside a jagged, exploding bubble. A postcard for We Interrupt the Programme (or WITP) shows a candid photo of a man in a business suit shot from the side, walking along a busy street; the headline underneath him reads "THINK IT POSSIBLE YOU MAY BE MISTAKEN." At the bottom is an attribution: "*after Oliver Cromwell.*" More typical of WITP's graphic experimentation are various series of unadorned snapshots (a baseball cap; a payphone; a view of cargo containers across a highway; a formal family portrait) laid out in grid-like patterns, each one accompanied by a word (respectively: "ABOVE"; "SPEAK"; "TRANSFER"; "WE"). WD+RU has something in common with WITP, also based in England, which continues to formulate

[38] See Triggs & Cook (1997) for an overview.

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an open-ended, reflexive approach to design informed directly by key thinkers in British cultural studies, and elaborated through student workshops and educational conferences.

Members of the *ad hoc* coalitions ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), Gran Fury, Dyke Action Machine!, and Queer Nation have all worked to fight public ignorance and hostility towards gay men, lesbians, transsexuals, bisexuals and queers over the last 10-20 years. Queer Nation was best known for its performative actions concerning the promotion of queerness as a non-normative, yet viable and inclusive, subject position. ACT UP, Gran Fury and Dyke Action Machine have produced highly memorable, "in-your-face" graphics relating directly to homophobia and the AIDS crisis. For example: a black poster with the stark legend "SILENCE = DEATH" in white type underneath a pink triangle (the potent symbol recently co-opted from the crude system used by the Nazis to categorize concentration camp prisoners); a Benetton-esque montage of three mixed-gender couples, each pair lip-locked under the headline "KISSING DOESN'T KILL: GREED AND INDIFFERENCE DO."(McQuiston 1993, pp. 128-129); and, a highly produced fashion spread in which a pierced and tattooed butch holds her lover - and her lover's breast - in her hands, accompanied by the headline "Dykes were family by golly, before families became trendy." (McQuiston 1997, p. 170)

Historical precursors include the Alpha Group (Jobling & Crowley 1996; Radford 1987), ringl + pit (Lavin 2001), and Grapus (McQuiston 1993). The Alpha Group was "a collective of graphic designers" which included "the 3 Jameses" of the Artists International Association (1933-1971): James Fitton, James Boswell, and James Holland. Grapus is tersely described in Kinross (1992) as a "French graphic design group, established in 1970 and disbanded in 1991. They worked as a collective, for political and cultural bodies, especially the French Communist Party: adventurous and uninhibited work, particularly posters." (Kinross 1992, p. 88)

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Marlene McCarty and Gran Fury

Marlene McCarty has been intimately associated with various modes of design, from out-and-out commercial projects to high-profile graphic activism. McCarty is a New York-based activist, artist, and graphic designer who trained in Cincinnati and Basel, Switzerland. Her creative activities have long combined a keen interest in the nexus of art, design and politics. She was a member of the AIDS activist group Gran Fury and a founder of Women's Action Committee (WAC)[39], and has worked for organizations such as Gay Men's Health Crisis, Art Against AIDS, and Doctors Without Borders. A recent gallery show of her pen-and-ink drawings of adolescent girls was described in *The New Yorker* as having "inaugurated their own genre: sunny noir." (Als 2002)

Prior to establishing her own design studio in 1989 - which has since become entirely "virtual" (www.vBureau.com) - McCarty worked for various organizations, including the corporate design firm Seigal & Gale, The Museum of Modern Art, and the late Tibor Kalman's studio M&Co. (Although perhaps best known for her striking graphics, McCarty also trained in film animation and video, and has created opening title sequences for movies such as *Swoon* (US 1992), *I Shot Andy Warhol* (US 1996), *The Ice Storm* (US 1997), *Velvet Goldmine* (US 1998) and *American Psycho* (US 2000).)

My principle interest in McCarty lies in the fact that she is both firmly planted in the midst of graphic design's habitus (having had a conventional studio with clients such as the cosmetics company Clinique) and also marginal to it - as evidenced in her

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[39] WAC's logo is an omniscient, black-and-white eye, often accompanied by the slogan "WAC IS WATCHING / WOMEN TAKE ACTION." A typically combative WAC poster from 1992 featured a greatly enlarged black-and-white news photo of New York's Cardinal O'Connor - an outspoken opponent of abortion - juxtaposed with the legend "KEEP YOUR ROSARIES OUT OF OUR OVARIES." (McQuiston 1997, pp. 158-159)

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commitment to a range of social, cultural and political issues relating to gender and sexuality, and, more specifically, her exploration of these issues in her art and activism.

In interview (McCarty 2002), McCarty spoke with passion about the frustrations of being a designer, and, in the following instance, her role as cofounder and business partner in the design company Bureau:

> I get so tired of cheerleading for all these other people's projects. Basically, a client comes in, they have X Project; what you have to do is wrap your mind around that project and become, like, 'this is the most fabulous thing on earth!' and cheerlead that project to this wonderful place. And that's what, for me, became so hard: to constantly keep doing [this], again, and again, and again. And I think for me in a weird way that's the part of graphic design I can't get my mind around; is the fact that it's a *secondary* art. It's always contingent...you can make things happen on your own, but it does take a lot of willpower. Otherwise, graphic design is always dependent on...somebody else's *thing*. And that's the part that, even after all these years...even after having an experience where I've seen it not be a service industry...that's the part of it that I'm still disillusioned by.

McCarty posed these issues as a question of identification and political commitment:

> Are you in service to something in a critical way, in a challenging way, in a way that's possibly pushing your client - or the people you're working with - a step further, because that also is a part of your job? Or is it just [about] maintaining their status quo? And I feel like that's what 95% of graphic designers do. Just maintain the status quo of somebody else.

She acknowledged that what she could do in creative and critical terms for a corporate client such as Clinique was minimal, compared to, say, her work as a member of Gran Fury. McCarty also noted that in other instances, she felt that a mutually productive relationship was possible, for example Bureau's work with Doctors Without Borders. She described them, in principle, as a radical organization, although their visual communications were at the time positively "mangy." Here was an ideal instance in which Bureau became heavily involved - for example by providing copywriting services - and by drawing on their rich, and woefully underused archive of photography by highly skilled individuals such as Sebastião Salgado.

The graphic interventions of the quasi-anonymous agitprop collective Gran Fury (McQuiston 1993, 1997; but see especially Crimp & Rolston 1990) were integral to the

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protest movement that sprang up in urban centers - especially New York - during the formative years of the AIDS crisis. They have most often been acknowledged in the habitus of graphic design through brief textual references, or the reproduction of key posters from the Gran Fury oeuvre - which serves to lend legitimacy and kudos to a habitus that is, as already claimed, overwhelmingly conservative (i.e. almost singularly commercial in its orientation). This is, of course, emblematic of precisely the danger identified by Sontag, above: all design becomes part of the (decontextualized; depoliticized) "cultural smorgasbord" regularly feasted upon by those members of the bourgeoisie associated with cultural production; that is, the new petite bourgeoisie, aka the new cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu 1984).

Queer Nation

Queer Nation's star shone briefly and very brightly for a mere two and a half years in the early 1990s. With major chapters in New York and San Francisco, it was successful in attracting a great deal of attention, both from within the queer community (at its height, the San Francisco chapter had up to 400-450 attendees at its meetings) and in the mainstream media. Queer Nation articulated its ideas through highly performative, public gestures, and through particularly striking graphics (e.g. stickers, banners, t-shirts, etc.) - all of which goes some way to explaining how much of the public attention Queer Nation garnered was out of all proportion to its *relatively* modest membership and similarly limited financial means.

While this movement adhered fairly strictly to the ideals of an anonymous collective, one member in particular has been publicly associated with the group's activities. In interview with me (Katz 2002), Jonathan Ned Katz acknowledged these tensions, but nevertheless agreed to talk about his involvement with Queer Nation, and the San Francisco chapter in particular.

Taking their lead from the emergence of the radical sexual politics of queer theory, Queer Nation was premised on the "queering of public spaces", most notably

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and succinctly through multiple "kiss-ins." Katz noted that Queer Nation carried with it an acute resistance to the phenomenon of "ghettoization": for example, none of the hundreds of small and major "actions" took place in the Castro, San Francisco's fabled gay neighborhood. Rather, they chose ostensibly straight bars and restaurants, shopping malls, trains, and the street as sites of protest (for first-hand accounts of some of these actions, see Burke 1993).

Queer Nation often exhibited a high level of media savvy. In full recognition of the fact that many of their actions would end abruptly, often in arrests, they used this to their advantage. As Katz explains:

> We were very aware of...the immediate necessity of communicating a message visually when you didn't have time to communicate a complicated message. We knew that we operated under constraints: about four minutes after snapping together the flagpole at the inauguration [of homophobic governor Pete Wilson, in California's State capitol] we were all in jail. We didn't have time to talk to anybody. We needed to get it up and get it on TV and then we needed to have the cameras rolling on our arrests. All of which happened. When we did shopping mall actions it was only a matter of minutes before the shopping mall police would try to arrest us.

Katz confirmed the key role played by graphic design in communicating its messages, even referring to something called the "Queer Nation font": a particular typeface that came to be heavily associated with the movement's visual presentation. I asked him why it often seemed to be that interventions centered on the rights of sexual minorities (ACT UP; Gran Fury; Queer Nation) were characterized by highly memorable graphics - after all, many, many political interventions rely purely on non-graphic approaches, such as petitions, lobbying, etc. Still more of them use relatively unsophisticated styles of postering and banners. My own suggestion was that the urban, gay male (and often middle class) experience is intimately related to the habitus of the cultural intermediaries. On the one hand, as Katz suggested, some of the members of Queer Nation were designers or typographers; on the other, it is evidently more socially acceptable to be out and gay in an urban, arts-based environment.

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RTMark

RTMark is an anonymous art/activism collective that recently described itself as "an internet-based market system that supports anti-corporate activist projects." The group claims a variety of historical influences including the Yippies and the Guerilla Girls (Guerrero 2002). In a recent classroom discussion, one of the collective's founders - presenting himself under the pseudonym Frank Guerrero (Guerrero 2002) - took issue with *Adbusters* and Kalle Lasn in particular. He noted that, while the magazine had been very interesting in its early days, it had since begun to present itself as the definitive, if not exclusive, venue for culture jamming, even going so far as to denounce the activities of RTMark (pronounced "art-mark") as irrelevant.

RTMark's activities are not particularly sophisticated in terms of graphic design per se, but they have been described as interventions consistent with the notion of culture jamming. Like Queer Nation, their actions are highly performative. These include swapping the voice boxes of Barbies and GI Joes in the guise of the Barbie Liberation Front; posing as emissaries from the World Trade Organization at economic conferences (an ongoing project called The Yes Men); and, creating and distributing software that allows anyone to mimic and simultaneously subvert any existing website.

Like WD+RU, RTMark also acts as a kind of intermediary: their website also functions as a clearing house for (often illegal) culture jamming. For example, as yet untried anti-corporate actions are listed alongside modest cash incentives (provided by anonymous donors); anyone who can document a successful action can pick up the requisite reward. One well-known instance of this was the surreptitious inclusion of a gay-themed "easter egg" in a computer/video game (i.e. a hidden message or game scenario that can only be accessed using particular keyboard commands or via high scores). A California-based programmer found himself working on a product called SimCopter, a "shoot 'em up" game that displays many of the characteristic markers of electronic products that are designed to appeal to a pre- and adolescent (and putatively

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heterosexual) male audience (i.e. violence, heterosexism, misogyny, etc.). When a very high score is achieved in SimCopter, it ends with scantily-clad women appearing out of nowhere and embracing the winning (male) character. The programmer (who is gay) managed to incorporate an alternative, homoerotic ending into the game, 84,000 copies of which were shipped before the subterfuge was discovered - at which point he was fired[40].

Another of RTMark's ongoing projects has been the development of a computer program, named Reamweaver after the webpage design program Dreamweaver, which allows for the content of existing sites to be modified and then redirected to a separate URL. Examples include www.gatt.org and www.waronevil.com - the former "adopts" the content of the World Trade Organization's website (www.wto.org) to develop a satirical critique of the WTO's policies (the WTO was previously called GATT - the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade); the latter "borrows" the content of the White House's website to critique its rhetoric on terrorism.

"Inside the Form"

Aside from historical and contemporary collectives such as those described above, there are, today, a limited number of individuals whose exploration of the progressive-to-radical possibilities of graphic design has been in marked contrast to its more usual framing as a tool of commercial communication. Among these are Sue Coe, who continues to produce and promote startling graphics against the use of animals in food production. Sylvia Harris heads an initiative that aims to bring the principles of information design to the voting process in the US.

Critical Voices in Education: van Toorn; de Bretteville

As we have seen, an admonition simply to do more responsible design (cf First Things First), or even calls to interfere with the commercial rhetoric of advertisers and

[40] A *potential* consolation here is that, at least according to anecdote, the programmer was already considering leaving his job at this particular videogame company.

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marketers (culture jamming), posits graphic design as an end in itself: doing the right kind of work, or doing it differently, is framed as a viable, highly pragmatic political position that may be enough in and of itself (cf Lavin 2001). As the Dutch designer and educator Jan van Toorn has noted, however, graphic design "can certainly not be reduced to form-related solutions to conceptual problems (as many designers believed for so long)." (van Toorn 1998, p. 153)

Van Toorn is an interesting figure, since his ideas about design have been explored extensively through his practice, and in concert with a sustained involvement in education and cultural theory. Van Toorn founded and directed the postgraduate programme for fine arts, design and theory at the Jan van Eyck akademie in Maastricht from 1991 to 1998, and has taught internationally, for example as part time faculty at Rhode Island School of Design. As editor of a book that came out of an international conference called design *Beyond Design* (held in 1997 at the akademie, and co-organized by him), van Toorn declared his investment in "the democratic renewal of communication design as a potential source of public awareness." (van Toorn 1998, p. 13) This he proposed

> by means of a constructive social responsibility, in which it is possible to allocate space again to the old notions of social equity and emancipation. In my view design can play an important role in this development because of its directive function in image production, if it seriously reintroduces the forgotten socio-cultural agenda into its thinking and acting. (van Toorn 1998, p. 161)

De Bretteville is professor and director of graphic design at Yale University's School of Art in New Haven, and has devoted much of her career to the exploration and execution of socially engaged design projects, most particularly in the older, run-down neighborhoods of New Haven (but also in Los Angeles, New York and Boston). As she explains,

> what is central both to my own work and to the educational program at Yale is a process that involves asking, listening, reflecting, suggesting, and sustaining. It's a process that entails on the part of the designers a deep sense of connection and initiative in creating their work. They learn to ask and listen to themselves as authorities in the process of creating, and to ask and listen to others, to establish a dialogue with the design audience.... At Yale, it's asking the students about

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> their experience and their wants and needs and then helping them realize those things through suggesting possible paths. And in my work as a designer, it's asking the people who have lived and worked at my sites about what they remember and what they need remembered so that what I do with them reflects and sustains them - and even, I hope, sustains people who come along to those sites in the future. (de Bretteville 1998, p. 115)

A particularly vivid example of de Bretteville's work is her Path of Stars project. Referencing its Hollywood namesake, the New Haven public art initiative began with extensive research into the "ordinary people" and "immigrant neighborhoods" of the city. De Bretteville identified individuals from the city's past, such as a female property owner from the C18th and an ex-janitor then living at the Veteran's hospital. The latter was a man of African descent called Joseph McAlpine, who had begun working for the local gas company in the mid 1950s. McAlpine approached his own bosses about helping local folks pay their bills in affordable increments, and ultimately became their community representative. De Bretteville then created commemorative plaques that were embedded in the sidewalk at strategic spots around these newly resuscitated neighborhoods. (de Bretteville 1998, pp. 118-120)

WD+RU

Women's Design and Research Unit (WD+RU; see also www.deskwithdrawers.org) was begun in 1994 as a collaboration between Liz McQuiston and Teal Triggs. McQuiston is the author of several books on political graphics (1993, 1997). (Although both of these books are highly illustrated, the examples included are also contextualized via critical commentary and historical notes - which excuses them, if only partially, from Sontag's critique, discussed above.) The group has been involved in editorial projects, postering, postcards, web and multimedia initiatives, but these generally emerge from an ongoing commitment to presentations and workshops in art schools and at international conferences. As Triggs explains: "WD+RU is very much about educating designers and students about the possibilities of some of these ideas and some of these different directions. And we really see ourselves

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as facilitators, and [finding] ways of getting people to engage in the discourse." (Triggs 2002)

Triggs offered an illustrative anecdote concerning a presentation by WD+RU at the Royal College of Art, a highly selective graduate design school in London. Two students, a man and a woman, were asked about their experiences as interns in design companies: whereas the man reported that he tended to spend his time doing design work, the woman replied that she often ended up making the tea. Only when gently - but firmly - pressed by Triggs did she concede that this might be an inequitable arrangement, not least because she might justifiably expect more of her experience as a member of the RCA's prestigious programs.

According to Triggs, the original impetus for WD+RU was an incident at a typography conference:

> We first started...as a result of the FUSE conference, held here in London, and me raising my hand during the conference and saying to Neville [Brody, who is widely regarded as graphic design's first 'popstar'] 'why is it all white middle-class males with glasses up on stage....we've always had our feminist-inspired causes, but this actually gave us a direction, and something to talk about with people....when Jon Wozencroft [a co-organizer of FUSE] gave us that opportunity to put together Pussy Galore [an editorial feature in FUSE magazine centering on a new typeface - called Pussy Galore], we thought 'OK, fine, we will do something that we feel quite passionate about - and that's language, and how people talk to each other, and how people talk about women and men and design and so forth.' (Triggs 2002)

Like Bestley and Noble of We Interrupt the Programme (discussed below), they continue to develop a theoretically and critically informed perspective on the teaching of design (affiliations here) which also manifests itself in editorial and web projects (see for example Triggs & Cook 1997). Co-collaborators have included Karen Mahony, who owns an interactive design company, a web designer called Justy Phillips, and another graphic designer called Siân Cook. WD+RU is currently run by Triggs and Cook.

In some ways WD+RU helps its members mediate between their educational and political commitments. As Triggs explains,

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my main thing is education, and WD+RU helps facilitate that, and then working full time within an academic institution is another way of giving myself a breathing space to do research, to engage in the discourse - the critical debates - and find out more about them in order to bring those back into WD+RU and then ultimately back into the students.

Although WD+RU's organizers (and output) are very much invested in graphic design as a medium of communication, Triggs pointed out that while their thinking may indeed end up being expressed through posters, postcards and web content (for example), they place significant emphasis on the written word. In other words, ideas expressed through language (that is, both the targets of critique themselves and WD+RU's responses) take precedence over the image-making process. This approach can be contrasted with the work of We Interrupt the Programme, for example (see below). (While Bestley and Noble of WITP are also very much invested in critical debate, their ideas are often explored and elaborated through the medium of design - as we shall see in a moment.

Triggs remains hopeful that graphic design can play an important part in progressive political change. Citing, for example, designer Sylvia Harris' work on materials to aid in the improvement of the voting and election process in the US, Triggs added: "I think design has very much a part to play...and government needs to recognize that....I think I'm very very optimistic about it all." (It is interesting to note that the first two examples she invoked, however, involved industrial/product design; the first being Victor Papanek, a key figure in the sustainable design movement[41] and author of the legendary book *Design for the Real World* (Papanek 1972), and the National Institute of Design in India, which has much in common with Papanek's ideas about using local, recycled materials to build radios, transportation devices, well pumps, etc.. Indeed, it would seem that it is much easier to imagine the practice of product

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[41] Sustainable design can be understood as an approach to problem-solving in various realms of design (especially product, industrial and architectural) that places primary emphasis on environmentally sound choices with respect to overall concept, location, materials, construction/manufacture and use. This includes an underlying commitment to anticipating and minimizing any adverse ecological impacts.

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design (aka industrial design) as an agent of change, since, to the uninitiated, *graphic* design as an activity is principally a medium of expression, not a practice, or a set of artifacts - and least of all a lived culture unto itself[42].

We Interrupt the Programme

Russell Bestley and Ian Noble are graphic designers and lecturers at the London College of Printing in England. Their writing and research on graphic design, under the partnership We Interrupt the Programme, is concerned with elaborating a theoretically informed pedagogical approach to the teaching of design and typography, and with the development of their own work as designers, which is specifically concerned with social engagement. As they declare,

> our conception of the practice [of graphic design] should not be confused with a limited consideration of the profession or business of graphic design - debate about the subject has widened its scope considerably. A reflexive critical approach (an essential element of the design process itself) is necessary for the grounding and positioning of a debate which surrounds the practice and carries it forward. (Bestley & Noble 2001, np)

Here, then, is evidence of an overt commitment to a theoretically informed engagement with the very premises of graphic design practice (i.e. the habitus), in light of "an inherent danger in the maintenance of a 'practice only' based position." This initiative, which also began in the mid-1990s, was overtly influenced from the outset by the contemporary theories of culture and communication associated with figures such as Roland Barthes, Raymond Williams, and John Fiske.

Bestley and Noble's project has been conceived and elaborated through conference presentations at various venues in England, and in collaboration with undergraduate and graduate design students and design educators in Austin, Texas; Manchester, England; Istanbul, Turkey; and, in absentia, in Maastricht, The Netherlands. As they explain:

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[42] There is of course an implicit, formal overlap here: graphic design may well be used to package, label, explain, and promote products.

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> On each occasion the collaboration has taken different forms. Leading on from an introductory lecture and seminar discussions surrounding the nature of graphic design, the project has been developed within a series of workshops which seek to explore the notion of open communication, and those strategies which might be employed by graphic designers seeking a more democratic approach to the construction of meaning. At each exposition this involved the production of single and multiple word and image combinations, the discussion of how these may work together in single and multiple narrative and how it may be possible to extend these ideas to reveal the processes and intentions at work in visual communication. (Bestley & Noble 2001, np

Whereas my own task has been to demystify graphic design by highlighting its existence as a site of cultural production, the point of entry chosen by Bestley and Noble includes the messages themselves, as well as the negotiation of meaning in production and reception:

> [B]y recognising the cultural diversity of both subject provider and message receiver, design may become more effective and more responsive to the public it purports to serve. Through an exposure to the intellectual and mechanical processes at work in the design, an opening out or a demystification of how visual communication takes place may occur. A two-way process, both less directed and more transparent to the viewer, could empower all participants in the construction of the message, whilst at the same time allowing a multiplicity of usually silent voices to be heard. (Bestley & Noble 2001, np)

In spite of the efforts they have made to date through We Interrupt the Programme, Bestley and Noble suggest that, although the "issue here for graphic design remains clear," it is also "to a large extent unresolved." (Bestley & Noble 2001, np)

Intermediaries as 'Producerly' Audiences: Notes Towards a New Analysis

The interventions I have discussed here rely to a greater or lesser degree on the specific skills associated with graphic design. More particularly, they represent a range of responses that, in sum, can be understood as testing the boundaries and the integrity - even the hegemony - of the graphic design habitus (or "habiti," given my broadening of the discussion to include a European perspective).

In this section I intend to advance my discussion by invoking the literature and terms of analysis developed under the auspices of audience research in cultural studies (see, for overviews, Lewis 1991; Ruddock 2001). Consistent with my continuing elaboration of a cultural economy approach, in which the conventional preoccupations

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of cultural studies are to be expanded to include a viable analysis of cultural production (or "encoding," cf Hall 1980; Wren-Lewis 1983; Hall 1994; Soar 1996, 2000a), I want to consider the graphic interventions discussed here as a subjective engagement with the unending mill of textual production within the so-called cultural "industries." The difference here is that these are conducted (notionally at least) from the production and consumption sides of the circuit of culture, rather than merely the consumption side. (Note that I say "production and consumption," not just production, since this is most consistent with my model of the short circuit: merely to identify these groups and individuals as producers would be to miss the point entirely.)

In *Encoding/Decoding* (Hall 1980), Stuart Hall argues that there is "no necessary correspondence" between the meaning encoded in any given text through the processes, rituals, and institutions of cultural production, and the meaning taken by any given audience through reading and reception (i.e. decoding). As a somewhat polemical attack on the then-dominant mass communication model of sender-message-receiver (cf Hall 1994), the encoding/decoding model has had a profound effect on the development of cultural and media studies. (It also has much in common with the notion of the circuit of culture (Johnson 1986/87; Soar 2000a).

Hall goes on to describe a taxonomy of textual reception, the first of which, the "dominant-hegemonic position", posits a viewer who "takes the connoted meaning...full and straight, and decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded." (Hall 1980, p. 136) The second, the "negotiated" code, involves "a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements" (Hall 1980, p. 137): The decoder "may take the meaning broadly as encoded, but by relating the message to some concrete or situated context which reflects his/her position and interests, the reader may modify or partially inflect the given preferred meaning." (Morley 1992, p. 89) Finally, then, the third position - the "oppositonal" code - describes a viewer who, for example, "perfectly...understand[s] both the literal and connotative inflection given

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by a discourse but...decode[s] the message in a globally contrary way." (Hall 1980, p. 137)

The model, then, has succeeded in opening up for scrutiny the subjective nature of reception in and through communication - formerly treated as an undifferentiated mass. Indeed, as Morley explains, encoding/decoding "allow[s] us to conceive of a socially structured audience and, as such, constitutes a considerable advance on any model which simply conceives of the audience as an unstructured aggregate of individuals." (Morley 1992, p.89) It has summarily failed, however, to grapple with the thorny issue of subjectivity in (cultural) production, or encoding.

Hall mentions, largely in passing, that what he calls the "professional" code "operates within the 'hegemony' of the dominant code....It may even be said that the professional codes serve to reproduce hegemonic definitions specifically by not overtly biasing their operations in a dominant direction: ideological reproduction therefore takes place here inadvertently, unconsciously" (Hall 1980, p. 136-137) Finally, and almost as an afterthought, he concedes that, "[o]f course, conflicts, contradictions and even misunderstandings regularly arise between the dominant and the professional significations and their signifying agencies." (Hall 1980, p. 137)

This is a set of issues taken up in depth by scholars researching the institutional and subjective complexities of cultural production (see Chapter 2). A particularly resonant example in this instance is Lisa Henderson's (Henderson 1999) ethnographic investigation of the production and reception of *Storyline*, a call-in public radio show[43] centering on books by women - and ostensibly targeted at a "middlebrow" (Henderson 1999, p. 330) female audience. One of the key issues she raises at the outset of her study

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[43] Henderson describes *Storyline* as "a recent year-long experiment in women's literature and call-in radio" (1999, p. 330); it was produced by WHYY-FM in Philadelphia, and debuted in the Fall of 1994. Henderson's particular emphasis related to the "contemporary rearticulation of the middlebrow" (1999, p. 330), treated here as "an ineffable, mixed, but still intelligible set of forms and values" (1999, p. 330); a viable and creative cultural space between the notionally distinct realms of highbrow and lowbrow.

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is the matter of "contention and dissent *among* producers" (1999, p. 332, emphasis in original). Henderson goes on to suggest that these "ranks and fractures and struggles" (between and among, for example: funding agencies; National Public Radio; the local affiliate that produced the show; the producer; and, the host) "come in many of the same guises as others in the social worlds outside production: struggles over gendered power, racial and class privilege, and sexual normativity; struggles articulated to employment; status and professional identity." (Henderson 1999, p. 332)

Designers, I have suggested, are exemplary intermediaries whose practice, like Henderson's radio producers, prevails in an often contested professional arena. Also like the producers of *Storyline*, they are their own first audience - privileged meaning-makers in the circuit of culture concerned, first and foremost, with an audience of peers (see also Radway 1997; Dornfeld 1998); and, an identifiable clique that demonstrates a range of cohesive tastes and preferences that I have discussed in terms of Bourdieu's notion of the habitus. So, we can perhaps consider the intermediaries - and graphic designers in particular - as a group which includes in its ranks dissident "readers": individuals who have full access to the kind of alternative discourses that make them alert to the ideological dimensions of the overall body of work that constitutes the (encoded) output of their professional milieu. As such, they, too, routinely travel between a negotiated and/or oppositional position with respect to the output of their peers (and even their own work) within the realm of the habitus.

In this sense, the professional code is not entirely consistent with the dominant code, but is shot through with radical, if exceptional, contradictions. Thus the work of WD+RU, or Jan van Toorn, or We Interrupt the Programme (for example), can best be understood as attempts to expand the professional code to include positions other than the dominant position; to attempt to occupy, through nominally "professional" activities, the negotiated and/or oppositional positions that are so much more consistent with their particular political worldviews. In the next section I return once again to the

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interventions discussed earlier in the chapter, with the intention of re-appraising their activities in light of the alternative model I have just proposed.

Negotiation and Opposition in the Creation of the Graphic Design Text

The perspective developed by Jan van Toorn through his writing and design work can be understood in this new frame as an attempt to introduce a critical perspective into commercial design work:

> a critical resistance may be expected to come up with a deliberately ideological interpretation of the commission. This is not the same thing as a political position that finds expression in a design for political action, as is often supposed. It is an imaginative and productive vision that politicises design through a modification of the method. In principle, in the case of every commission, it is a matter of finding an articulated coherence between the reality of the relations of production and the established symbolic order, on the one hand, and the substantial and critical interpretation of the mediation, on the other hand. It means walking the tightrope between analysis and imagination, a combination of practical insight and ethics that redefines design as a dialogic form of communication. (van Toorn 1998, p. 160)

This elaboration of an alternative approach to design practice, which van Toorn refers to as an "operational critique" (van Toorn 1998, p. 160), suggests that it should be possible to discover and exploit a critical space within any design job, regardless of the basic communicative function that is required of it by the client.

There are distinct parallels here with the interventionist approach explored by We Interrupt the Programme. Indeed, Bestley and Noble have, in effect, been wed to the notion of a critical design practice through their experiments in the intuitive, collaborative expansion of the graphic design form itself. As described earlier in this chapter, their work explores and sometimes exhibits a kind of polysemy that resides not merely in the connotative realm but also at the denotative level. This in itself might be considered a radical act, given Hall's earlier supposition that denotative meaning, contra connotation, is largely fixed (cf Hall 1980) in the process of encoding. Unlike van Toorn's efforts, however, Bestley and Noble's collaborative design work remains experimental; aside from its deployment in a series of posters for We Interrupt the Programme's various conferences and workshops (Bestley & Noble 2001), it is unclear

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how their approach might be applied in the often singularly-pragmatic realm of commercial design work.

Lewis (1991) has noted that the recent literature on the "resistive pleasures" of reading (e.g. Fiske 1989) must be distinguished in principle from the negotiated and oppositional reading positions proposed by Hall (1980). Indeed, for Lewis, in the case of the former, "there is no need...to self-consciously draw upon other discourses - the material for the resistive/popular reading is already there in the program [i.e. television text]." Lewis (1991, pp. 69-70) Applying this insight to the realm of cultural production, we find that the activities of WD+RU, WAC, Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, Class Action and even the Guerilla Girls can be understood as focused on presenting cultural producers - including members of the graphic design habitus - with an ongoing feminist critique of sexism and misogyny within the realms of design and art education and cultural production, and further afield in some of the more problematic visual representations to be found in contemporary culture. In this sense, they are invested in elevating a merely popular or resistive position among designers to an oppositional one.

Class Action, for example, a group of current and former Yale students originally working under the tutelage of Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, had been invited to the annual International Design Conference in Aspen (Banham 1974; Allen 1983) in 1994 to present some of their work (in this case, a billboard project addressing the abortion debate). Upon receiving the publicity brochure for the event, however, they determined that its chief image demanded immediate critical attention. (Intended to reflect the conference theme that year - *Design and Human Bodies* - the front cover featured a Picasso-esque cut-out collage of a woman lying on her back, arms above her head, with legs bent at the knees and spread apart.) Consequently, while at the conference, the members of Class Action distributed an alternative brochure that critiqued the conference's thematic graphic in the most emphatic, yet designerly, terms: the first image was a clever rearrangement of the collage's elements such that the breasts

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became testicles - made unmistakably so by the addition of a dangling penis. The conference title was changed to read *Interpretation of Human Bodies*. For the second image, members of Class Action took the original and added photographic representations of various body parts from pornographic magazines - heads, breasts, boot- and pump-clad feet, and a vagina; here the title was adjusted to read, mockingly, *Consumption of Human Bodies*. (see de Bretteville 1998, pp. 114, 117)

Discussion

The relative ease with which the terms of the encoding/decoding perspective can be applied to the realm of the graphic design habitus suggests that this frame might well be able to lend substantial critical leverage to the project of developing a cultural economy of graphic design. It also hints at an untapped range of critical perspectives that might yet be built around some of the most foundational theories associated with cultural studies, but applied more frequently to the realm of cultural reception, and assumed (wrongly) to be relevant only there. It must be stressed at this stage, however, that such a project should not be understood as a way to celebrate the "pleasures" of work, or merely to apply some kind of emancipatory politics to cultural (or any other kind of) production within a capitalist system of exchange and commodification. Designers, after all, may have been categorized as a homogeneous mass - undifferentiated elements within the realm of mass production or the cultural industries - but are not, to any significant extent, a socially or politically oppressed constituency. This frame, then, allows most readily for the potential evaluation of the relative merits of interventions such as those described in this chapter. Rather than suggesting that they be assessed merely on the basis of their isolated artistic or political merit, we can begin to understand them as a diverse array of negotiated or oppositional responses to the status quo.

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CHAPTER 6

TOWARDS A CULTURAL ECONOMY OF GRAPHIC DESIGN

"Graphic design will save the world right after rock and roll does."
David Carson, graphic designer (Poynor 2001a, p.53)

Introduction

I set out to write this dissertation as a scholar and graphic designer interested in developing a critical analysis of the progressive-to-radical impulses being currently expressed within, and on the margins of, the graphic design profession. Historical analysis persuaded me that this has actually been a resident characteristic of design practice going back to its earliest roots in the Modern movement in Europe, and in the nascent development of advertising (or commercial art, as was) in the US.

I proposed a schematic model of the circulation of meaning among the cultural intermediaries, understood as a privileged, insular discourse quite apart from - and *prior to* - the conventionally conceived audiences to be found in other models of cultural reception (e.g. Johnson 1986/87). While this allowed me to explore a novel, relational discourse in terms of meaning production and circulation, its manifestation as a shared set of values was greatly facilitated by the invocation of Bourdieu's notion of the habitus. I could then think through the implications of understanding designers as occupying a notional, cultural space which also acted as a well-spring of, and for, common-sense ideas about design and the world more generally[44].

Perhaps the most useful notion to emerge from this discussion was the inference that "work," for the cultural intermediaries in particular, is a *cultural* activity such that

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[44] A potential criticism of this project, and particularly of the issues discussed in Chapter 4, is that my field research has focused too narrowly on *eminent* practitioners and critics of graphic design, thereby replicating the dynamics of graphic design discourse itself. Indeed, future research might hone in on some of the many thousands of designers beyond the "usual suspects." I will also note, however, that the short circuit was originally proposed (Soar 1996, 1999) in relation to a number of advertising creatives more broadly representative of "rank and file" intermediaries; in this sense, I maintain that the short circuit is still absolutely relevant to the analysis of the cultural intermediaries, regardless of relative professional status and cultural capital.

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the categorical division of work and leisure, production and consumption, authorship and reception, becomes complicated, if not entirely untenable, as a critical position. It did, however, confirm that the graphic design habitus can be chiefly characterized by its specifically conservative function in perpetuating a core set of professional and quasi-professional values, demarcating the boundaries of legitimate practice, and simultaneously embracing historically radical design interventions as textual artifacts that demonstrate design's variety and flexibility as a medium of expression (while neglecting or negating the political impulses behind them).

In Chapters 4 and 5 I conducted a series of investigations into a variety of interventions that have garnered attention for, and from, the intermediaries. It immediately became clear that these cannot be understood merely on their own terms. The brash and combative rhetoric of a call-to-ethical-arms (in the guise of the First Things First manifesto) and the adoption - and even cooptation - of culture jamming as an interventionist form of criticism could both be understood as relatively spectacular, yet strangely insipid strategies. This was particularly so when compared to an array of already-existing, politically and intellectually savvy interventions that lend more traction to a critique of contemporary culture and the activities of the cultural intermediaries themselves.

In Chapter 1 I quoted Raymond Williams as saying that

> there needs to be developed many different kinds of analysis which are in touch with each other....the least developed...is that which tries to understand precisely the production of certain conventions and modes of communication right inside the form. I would put this at the top of the list not because it could answer all the questions on the table, but because it's the least likely thing to happen. (Williams, Heath, & Skirrow, 1986, p.14)

In essence, then, I would suggest that these are precisely the tactics deployed by WD+RU and especially We Interrupt the Programme and Jan van Toorn: a systematic, theoretically informed series of maneuvers conceived as a way to get "right inside the form" of design. It is also dramatically clear, at this stage in my argument, that Williams

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was absolutely right to suggest that such work is generally "the least likely thing to happen."

The organizing principle developed in this project, and consequently employed in the distinction made between spectacular interventions (Chapter 4) and 'small ideas' (Chapter 5), carries with it a vital, yet unspoken, assertion. This can be described as an abiding faith in the notion that there is greater political leverage to be found in *theoretically informed* interventions (i.e. those covered in Chapter 5). Indeed, one might usefully compare the particularly aggressive anti-intellectual pronouncements of Kalle Lasn, as editor of *Adbusters* and author of the book *Culture Jam* (Lasn 1999b), with the thoughtful engagements of, for example, We Interrupt the Programme with the work of Raymond Williams, or WD+RU with various strands of thought associated with contemporary third wave feminism. We might ultimately infer, then, that a sustained engagement with theory can lead to a more nuanced and self-reflexive sense of what is actually meant by 'politics.'

In order to assess the interventions explored in Chapter 5, I invoked the terms of analysis most routinely used in the assessment of the reception of media texts by audiences, at least within the cultural studies canon. This proved fruitful in grappling with the tactics developed in these localized initiatives, many of which have been directly informed by contemporary cultural theories and politics. It is important to note that many of these examples emanate from outside the domestic scene and, in particular, from England and the Netherlands. Given the sheer number of designers in the US and Canada compared with these European countries, we might also infer that it is something specific to the historical construction of the graphic design habitus in North America, including its educational manifestations, that makes it less likely to generate or admit truly critical discourses.

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Towards a Cultural Economy of Graphic Design

Angela McRobbie has been a central figure in the emergence of cultural economy as a fresh mode of enquiry that insists on treating the workplace as a cultural locus:

> [t]he marriage of culture with work heralds a new and important relation. Culture in this specific context refers to the creative, expressive and symbolic activities in media, arts and communicative practices....this is a sector which has expanded dramatically over recent years, one which is also constantly renewing and reinventing itself in response to changing technology and the development of new media." (McRobbie 2002, p. 97)

Her recent research has focused on fashion design in Britain, underscoring once again the centrality of the intermediaries in emergent discussions about the generative dynamics of cultural production.

McRobbie argues that "the couplet 'creativity/talent' has recently come to represent the most desired of human qualities, expressive of, indeed synonymous with, an 'inner self', and hence a mark of uniqueness, and particularly resonant for young people poised to enter the job market." (McRobbie 2002, p. 109) This romanticized, but deeply engrained, focus on creativity ("understood as a sovereign space for finding 'pleasure in work' " McRobbie 2002, p. 98, quoting Donzelot 1991) among, for example, young fashion designers, journalists and TV production personnel in Britain, means that many individuals end up weathering a highly unstable job market, characterized by low- or even no-pay jobs as freelancers, exceedingly long hours, and an ever-present risk of unemployment (or, for the self-employed, bankruptcy). Most importantly, and perversely, a career-focus on creativity - with all its insecurities - actually seems to militate against any formal acts of organized resistance to such conditions; it is as if the definition of one's own labor as the expression or exploration of an "inner self" obviates the possibility of preserving or protecting one's interests as a *group*. In effect, then, to consciously organize is to somehow sully one's chances of "getting a break", "being discovered" or "making it." As McRobbie notes, in regard to her own work and that of Ursell (2000), "[w]orkplace politics is virtually unknown in

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the fashion industry, and...union membership by young television workers is negligible. Being freelance or self-employed appears to negate the idea of the politics of work." (McRobbie 2002, p. 112)

This argument is hugely important in thinking through the dynamics of the graphic design habitus in the US: if it is already defined by an overwhelmingly conservative orientation, then why is it that a regular influx of promising young designers - habitually understood as risk-taking, daring, controversial, anti-establishment, even radical (at least in creative terms) - appears to have little impact on the existing orientation of the habitus? First, as the insight offered via McRobbie suggests, "creativity" can be understood as, in actual fact, a rather modest - even functional - notion. Second, as Henderson (1999) has argued with respect to the "ambivalent (if no less determining) practices of [*Storyline*'s] professional-managerial producers", these individuals "are caught in a familiar ideological contradiction - of preferring a discourse they cannot (or will not) sustain." She goes on: "Like many such ideological effects, it is one of producers' own making, but not under conditions which they alone control." (Henderson 1999, p. 348) These, then, are the particular conditions of cultural *reproduction* within the realm of cultural production.

<u>When is an Intervention not an Intervention?</u>

In its *Design Anarchy* special issue of September/October 2001, *Adbusters* featured, on one of its pages, a reproduction of an old poster for a European drug company (see figure 4.). A young woman has been photographed in black and white, clasping her downcast head with both hands; the headline, "Kopfschmerzen?" (trans.: "Headache?"), rendered in a clinical *sans serif* typeface, stretches from forearm to forearm. The resultant shape - arms in an inverted 'V', headline slightly askew - looks like the letter 'A.' The only other information is the name of a drug ("Contrazipan 12mg") and the name of the drug company. A brief editorial accompanying the poster reads, in full:

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> It's one of the greatest design interventions on record. In 1958, the Swiss pharmaceutical company Pfäfferli + Huber AG hired graphic designer Ernst Bettler to create a series of posters celebrating the company's 50th anniversary. Bettler's cutting-edge work, they hoped, would put a post-war shine on the company. Bettler turned in a fine, four-poster series that soon hit the streets of Switzerland - where an incensed populace tore them down and exploded with rage against the arrogant, brutish corporation. Within six weeks, P + H was ruined forever. P + H, you see, had a history of involvement in testing carried out on prisoners in Germany's wartime concentration camps. Bettler hadn't forgotten. Taken one by one, the designer's four posters seem innocent enough. Posted in a row, however, they appear to be a series of letters (the 'A' is shown here). You can guess what four-letter word Bettler made sure to spell out for the world. (*Design interventions* 2001, np.)

My initial interest in this story was that, as *Adbusters* had suggested, it constituted a breathtaking and inspiring piece of graphic subterfuge; a dazzling testament to the power of design. It subsequently transpired that the article was based on a feature in the design magazine *[...]*; here, it appeared in a longer piece about the designer of the poster. This article, titled *'I'm only a Designer': The Double Life of Ernst Bettler* (Wilson 2000), included photographs of the designer from the 1950s and the present day and, once more, a reproduction of the poster from the original series of four (which one surmises actually spelled out, in combination, the word N-A-Z-I).

In attempting to do further research on this intervention, I came across several sources suggesting that the whole thing might actually be a hoax. Where, for instance, were the other three posters? Why was there no record or mention made of this incredible intervention in the small number of books that constitute the current public record of the history of graphic design? To my own amazement, in establishing this very fact, I soon stumbled on references to two designers in the third edition of Meggs' *A History of Graphic Design* (Meggs 1998a) whose names were strikingly familiar: Bruno Pfäffli (who worked for the famous typographer Adrian Frutiger) and Max Huber (1919-1992), a poster designer. Combining their last names gives us "Pfäffli and Huber." In addition, I discovered that a poster from 1960 by the famous modernist designer Josef Müller-Brockmann (see figure 5.), reproduced in Meggs' book (Meggs 1998a, p. 329, and elsewhere - e.g. Hollis 1994, p. 134; Frascara 1995, p. 50), bore a

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stunning similarity to the poster supposedly produced by Bettler: a young woman winces in pain as she clutches both hands to her ears, elbows aloft; a stark headline in German ("weniger Lärm", or "Less Noise") running counter to the upraised forearms helps to create the impression of a cross, or letter 'X.'

Having made this discovery, I emailed some of the individuals I had come to know over the years through my work on this dissertation, explaining why I now thought it was a hoax. Of the few who replied, the overall response was remarkably non-committal. For example, Michael Bierut, ex-AIGA president and partner at Pentagram New York, replied: "My guess is that it was intended as an inspirational parable of how a principaled [*sic*] (and tricky) graphic designer could turn the mechanics of capitalism against a sinister oligarchy. There are so few (if any) examples of this happening in real life, so why not just make one up...?" (Bierut 2001)

I am far less interested in proving conclusively that the Pfäfferli + Huber AG poster (or poster series) did or did not exist, than in the potential readings we can take from this issue - not in an historical sense, but as a contemporary story that emanated from the design habitus. To begin, then, this true/false story highlights the fact that most, if not all, of the interventions discussed so far in this dissertation have been resolutely earnest affairs that wear their politics in a particularly irony-free fashion. This is, in a sense, the purview of *Adbusters* - hence the appeal to them of the story that originally appeared in *[...]*. Unfortunately, there are a variety of clues in this issue of the journal that suggest a certain degree of mischief: in their opening comments, the editors mention that they will be "resorting to fiction to make certain points"; and that "[p]racticalities seem to be particularly lacking in this issue" (*[...]* 2000, p. 1); the single exception they offer is an article *other than* the one on Ernst Bettler. Another clue resides in the fact that whereas one article discussed "automatic text generators" (Marres 2000), another was apparently composed using one such computer program (sample text: "Lorraine Wild claimed that 'my take on that was always that *modernist* cognition',

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but intuitive statement suppositions cognitive design theory in vision." (DiLorenzo 2000, p. 63)) In a sense, then, the editors of *[...]* succeeded in jamming *Adbusters*, or at least highlighting their gullibility in this situation (the magazine's current art director was among those who did not reply after I emailed folks to announce my discovery).

There are other credible readings: the incident suggests a remarkable degree of inventiveness on the part of the four editors of *[...]*, all of whom are designers; an ability to combine image and text to create a credible, historical fiction. On the other hand, we might also understand this true/false story as a sad indictment of the impotence of design in creating social and political change, as hinted at in the comments made by Michael Bierut, above. In this interpretation, the editors might be understood as cynically flexing their creative muscles through the production of an "independent after-hours publication" (*[...]* 2000, p. 1) that offers them an avenue of expression unavailable during their day jobs (one describes himself as a "corporate designer"; the other three - also men - identify as graphic designers).

In yet another reading, we could surmise that the story of Ernst Bettler and the P + H poster(s) operates as an inspirational story: a testament to the active wish-life of design as a fantasy of (as-yet unrealized) power to create social change under duress and of the capacity to design *in spite of* clients.

Finally, design educators in particular might see the articles as evidence of designers' ignorance of historical precedent: the iconic work of Müller-Brockmann (his noise pollution poster has often been reproduced in reference works; see for example Hollis 1994, and Meggs 1998a) or the very existence of figures such as Bruno Pfäffli and Max Huber. This is especially so given the ubiquity of Meggs' book as a staple of graphic design education, at least in North America.

Notes Towards Future Research

While Angela McRobbie has noted that "[i]n cultural studies the turn to work and employment emerges from broader discussions of the 'cultural turn' as society and

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economy appear to be increasingly enculturalized", she also suggests that "a vocabulary for fully engaging with creative work is still at an early stage." (McRobbie 2002, p. 98) New contributions to this strand (du Gay & Pryke 2002, p. 6) of the emergent cultural economy debate may also help us develop a better understanding of this area (see for example du Gay & Pryke 2002; Nixon 2002). In some respects, this is precisely the shortfall I have sought to address in this dissertation and elsewhere (Soar 1996; 2000a; 2002).

McRobbie, and others besides, have determined that this kind of research must be, at least in part, empirical. As Don Slater has recently commented, with respect to his own work, and in parallel with my own and McRobbie's: "if we do not make sense of how advertisers actually carry out their commercial actions, then the global ideological analysis degenerates into a kind of abstract, disembodied functionalism: it appears as if advertising (rather than advertisers) creates capitalist or patriarchal subjects" (Slater 2002, p. 75) This is precisely the argument I made in Chapter 1; Slater, too, invokes the vital and highly influential work of Judith Williamson on advertising as being key in contributing - at least in retrospect - to a position which "has become axiomatic." (Slater 2002, p. 75)

The contemporary critical alternative favored by Slater, McRobbie, myself and others "generates an advocacy of ethnography as a methodological approach: an analysis of 'cultural economy' has to be built up from engagement with lived social practices rather than deduced from macro characterizations of pre-given social moments." (Slater 2002, p. 61) The novelty of my own approach, which has partly centered on an attempt to develop new models of understanding (the short circuit; the design habitus; the adaptation of Hall's taxonomy of decoding positions to the discussion of design-oriented cultural and political interventions), is also consonant with Slater's caveats about future research in the cultural economy vein:

> It is particularly crucial to debates within cultural studies and sociology of media and culture that the appropriate methodological response is not an 'additive' one,

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> a matter of adding traditional questions of political economy to a fundamentally cultural analysis, or an argument about the increased centrality of cultural industries in contemporary economy. Simply producing 'political economies *of* music or the Internet or other cultural industries is not the same as exposing the integral relationship between economic and cultural processes. (Slater 2002, p. 76)

Cultural economy, at least in my own work, is neither conceived to discredit political economy nor entirely reorient the project of cultural studies. Rather, it is a nascent approach that combines the theoretical with the empirical as a means to grapple with the otherwise mysterious world of cultural producers. My hope is that this kind of *intellectual* intervention can ultimately contribute valuable insights that will diversify and strengthen the range of strategies already available to us when attempting to develop critical yet nuanced analyses of the production and reproduction of contemporary culture.

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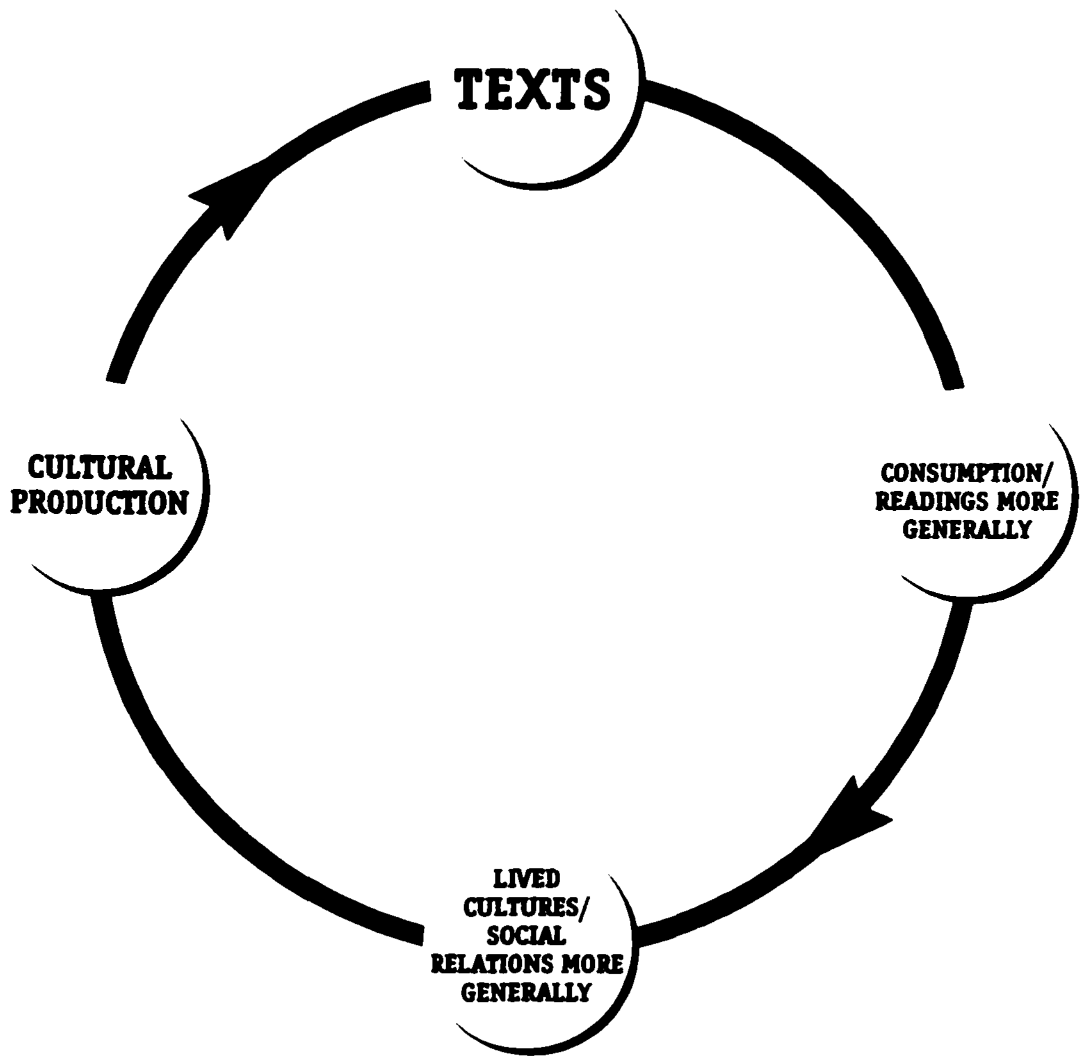

Figure1: The circuit of culture (after Johnson 1986/87)

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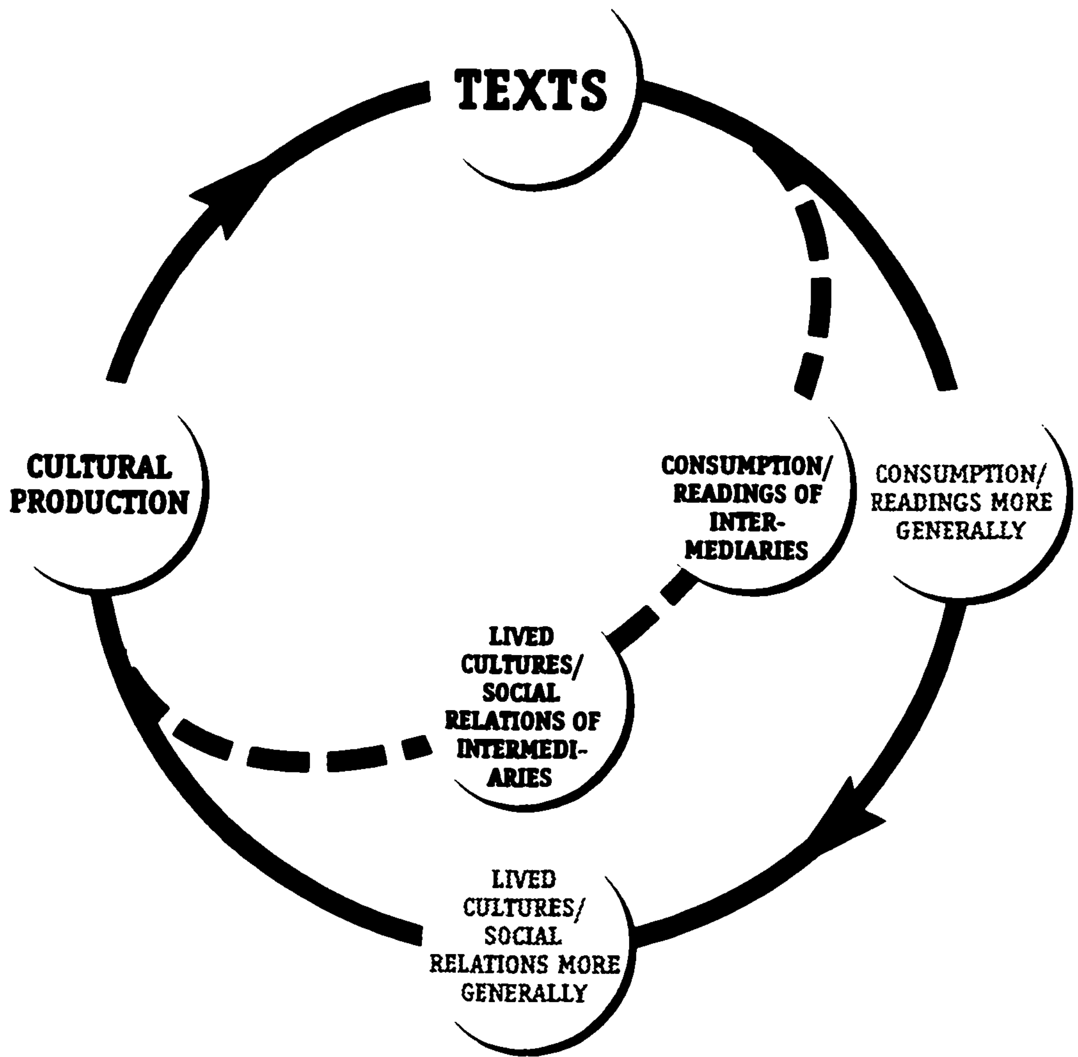

Figure2: The short circuit

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FIRST THINGS FIRST MANIFESTO 2000

We, the undersigned, are graphic designers, art directors and visual communicators who have been raised in a world in which the techniques and apparatus of advertising have persistently been presented to us as the most lucrative, effective and desirable use of our talents. Many design teachers and mentors promote this belief; the market rewards it; a tide of books and publications reinforces it.

Encouraged in this direction, designers then apply their skill and imagination to sell dog biscuits, designer coffee, diamonds, detergents, hair gel, cigarettes, credit cards, sneakers, butt toners, light beer and heavy-duty recreational vehicles. 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.

Many of us have grown increasingly uncomfortable with this view of design. Designers who devote their efforts primarily to advertising, marketing and brand development are supporting, and implicitly endorsing, a mental environment so saturated with commercial messages that it is changing the very way citizen-consumers speak, think, feel, respond and interact. To some extent we are all helping draft a reductive and immeasurably harmful code of public discourse.

There are pursuits more worthy of our problem-solving skills. Unprecedented environmental, social and cultural crises demand our attention. Many cultural interventions, social marketing campaigns, books, magazines, exhibitions, educational tools, television programs, films, charitable causes and other information design projects urgently require our expertise and help.

We propose a reversal of priorities in favor of more useful, lasting and democratic forms of communication — a mindshift away from product marketing and toward the exploration and production of a new kind of meaning. The scope of 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.

In 1964, 22 visual communicators signed the original call for our skills to be put to worthwhile use. With the explosive growth of global commercial culture, their message has only grown more urgent. Today, we renew their manifesto in expectation that no more decades will pass before it is taken to heart.

Jonathan Barnbrook
Nick Bell
Andrew Blauvelt
Hans Bockting
Irma Boom
Sheila Levrant de Bretteville
Max Bruinsma
Siân Cook
Linda van Deursen
Chris Dixon
William Drenttel
Gert Dumbar
Simon Esterson
Vince Frost
Ken Garland
Milton Glaser
Jessica Helfand
Steven Heller
Andrew Howard
Tibor Kalman
Jeffery Keedy
Zuzana Licko
Ellen Lupton
Katherine McCoy
Armand Mevis
J. Abbott Miller
Rick Poynor
Lucienne Roberts
Erik Spiekermann
Jan van Toorn
Teal Triggs
Rudy VanderLans
Bob Wilkinson

Figure 3: The First Things First Manifesto 2000

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Figure4: A poster ascribed to the designer "Ernst Bettler" (Wilson 2000)

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Figure 5: "Less Noise" by Josef Müller-Brockmann (Meggs 1998a, p. 329)

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