

## Culture Jamming: Ads Under Attack

By Naomi Klein

Bill Gates and Microsoft aren't the only corporate giants suffering a backlash against their superbrands. Last month, computer hackers invaded Nike's Web site in the latest protest against the company's alleged sweatshop practices, redirecting visitors to a site concerned with "the growth of corporate power and the direction of globalization." Similar rants have been directed at McDonald's--from the student who waved a sign with the arch logo at the World Trade Organization protest in Seattle to the axe-wielding vandal--now a cultural hero--who tried to thwart the opening of a McDonald's in the tiny town of Millau, France.

For their brilliance at building their brands, the marketers behind the likes of Nike, McDonald's, Wal-Mart and Starbucks now find themselves at the center of journalist Naomi Klein's avowed "next big political movement" in *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* from Picador/St. Martin's Press. Reporting everywhere from university campuses to garment factories in Third World countries, Klein depicts the encroachment of big-name brands on our daily lives, and the array of in-your-face counter-measures this has provoked among consumer advocates.

One such measure is discussed in the chapter partially excerpted here: "culture jamming," the practice of parodying ads and hijacking billboards to drastically alter their messages. "Something not far from the surface of the public psyche is delighted to see the icons of corporate power subverted and mocked," Klein writes, offering up memorable examples of "adbusting" done to Absolut, Levi's, Ford, Exxon, Apple and others.

It's Sunday morning on the edge of New York's Alphabet City and Jorge Rodriguez de Gerada is perched at the top of a high ladder, ripping the paper off a cigarette billboard. Moments before, the billboard at the corner of Houston and Attorney sported a fun-loving Newport couple

jostling over a pretzel. Now it showcases the haunting face of a child, which Rodriguez de Gerada has painted in rust. To finish it off, he pastes up a few hand-torn strips of the old Newport ad, which form a fluorescent green frame around the child's face.

When it's done, the installation looks as the 31-year-old artist had intended: as if years of cigarette, beer and car ads had been scraped away to reveal the rusted backing of the billboard. Burned into the metal is the real commodity of the advertising transaction. "After the ads are taken down," he says, "what is left is the impact on the children in the area, staring at these images."

Unlike some of the growing legion of New York guerrilla artists, Rodriguez de Gerada refuses to slink around at night like a vandal, choosing instead to make his statements in broad daylight. For that matter, he doesn't much like the phrase "guerrilla art," preferring "citizen art" instead. He wants the dialogue he has been having with the city's billboards for more than 10 years to be seen as a normal mode of discourse in a democratic society, not as some edgy vanguard act. While he paints and pastes, he wants kids to stop and watch--as they do on this sunny day, just as an old man offers to help support the ladder.

Rodriguez de Gerada is widely recognized as one of the most skilled and creative founders of culture jamming, the practice of parodying advertisements and hijacking billboards in order to drastically alter their messages. Streets are public spaces, adbusters argue, and since most residents can't afford to counter corporate messages by purchasing their own ads, they should have the right to talk back to images they never asked to see. In recent years, this argument has been bolstered by advertising's mounting aggressiveness in the public domain--painted and projected onto sidewalks; reaching around entire buildings and buses; into schools; onto basketball courts and on the Internet. At the same time, the proliferation of the quasi-public "town squares" of malls and superstores has created more and more spaces where commercial messages are the only ones permitted. Adding even greater urgency to

their cause is the belief among many jammers that concentration of media ownership has successfully devalued the right to free speech by severing it from the right to be heard.

All at once, these forces are coalescing to create a climate of semiotic Robin Hoodism. A growing number of activists believe the time has come for the public to stop asking that some space be left unsponsored, and to begin seizing it back. Culture jamming baldly rejects the idea that marketing—because it buys its way into our public spaces—must be passively accepted as a one-way information flow.

The most sophisticated culture jams are not stand-alone ad parodies but interceptions—counter-messages that hack into a corporation's own method of communication to send a message starkly at odds with the one that was intended. The process forces the company to foot the bill for its own subversion, either literally because the company is the one that paid for the billboard, or figuratively because anytime people mess with a logo, they are tapping into the vast resources spent to make that logo meaningful. Kalle Lasn, editor of Vancouver-based *Adbusters* magazine, uses the martial art of jujitsu as a precise metaphor to explain the mechanics of the jam, "In one simple deft move you slap the giant on its back. We use the momentum of the enemy." It's an image borrowed from Saul Alinsky who, in his activist bible, *Rules for Radicals*, defines "mass political jujitsu" as "utilizing the power of one part of the power structure against another part...the superior strength of the Haves become their own undoing." So, by rappelling off the side of a 30-by-90foot Levi's billboard (the largest in San Francisco) and pasting the face of serial killer Charles Manson over the image, a group of jammers attempts to leave a disruptive message about the labor practices employed to make Levi's jeans. In the statement it left on the scene, the Billboard Liberation Front said they chose Manson's face because the jeans were "Assembled by prisoners in China, sold to penal institutions in the Americas."

The term "culture jamming" was coined in 1984 by the San Francisco

audio-collage band Negativland. "The skillfully reworked billboard...directs the public viewer to a consideration of the original corporate strategy," a band member states on the album Jamcon '84. The jujitsu metaphor isn't as apt for jammers who insist that they aren't inverting ad messages but are rather improving, editing, augmenting or unmasking them. "This is extreme truth in advertising" one billboard artist tells me. A good jam, in other words, is an X-ray of the subconscious of a campaign, uncovering not an opposite meaning but the deeper truth hiding beneath the layers of advertising euphemisms. So, according to these principles, with a slight turn of the imagery knob, the now-retired Joe Camel turns into Joe Chemo, hooked up to an IV machine. Or Joe is shown about 15 years younger than his usual swinger self.

Like Baby Smurf, the "Cancer Kid" is cute and cuddly and playing with building blocks instead of sports cars and pool cues. And why not? Before R.J. Reynolds

reached a \$206 billion settlement with 46 states, the American government accused the tobacco company of using the cartoon camel to entice children to start smoking--why not go further, the culture jammers ask, and reach out to even younger would-be smokers? Apple computers' "Think Different" campaign of famous figures both living and dead has been the subject of numerous simple hacks: a photograph of Stalin appears with the altered slogan "Think Really Different"; the caption for the ad featuring the Dalai Lama is changed to "Think Disillusioned"; and the rainbow Apple logo is morphed into a skull. My favorite truth-in-advertising campaign is a simple jam on Exxon that appeared just after the 1989 Valdez spill: "Shit Happens. New Exxon," two towering billboards announced to millions of San Francisco commuters.

Attempting to pinpoint the roots of culture jamming is next to impossible, largely because the practice is itself a cutting and pasting of graffiti, modern art, do-it-yourself punk philosophy and age-old pranksterism. And using billboards as an activist canvas isn't a new

revolutionary tactic either. San Francisco's Billboard Liberation Front (responsible for the Exxon and Levi's jams) has been altering ads for 20 years, while Australia's Billboard Utilizing Graffitists Against Unhealthy Promotions (BUG-UP) reached its peak in 1983, causing an unprecedented \$1 million worth of damage to tobacco billboards in and around Sydney.

It was Guy Debord and the Situationists, the muses and theorists of the theatrical student uprising of Paris, May 1968, who first articulated the power of a simple détournement, defined as an image, message or artifact lifted out of its context to create a new meaning. But though culture jammers borrow liberally from the avant-garde art movements of the past--from Dada and Surrealism to Conceptualism and Situationism--the canvas these art revolutionaries were attacking tended to be the art world and its passive culture of spectatorship, as well as the anti-pleasure ethos of mainstream capitalist society. For many French students in the late '60s, the enemy was the rigidity and conformity of the Company Man; the company itself proved markedly less engaging. So where Situationist Asger Jorn hurled paint at pastoral paintings bought at flea markets, today's culture jammers prefer to hack into corporate advertising and other avenues of corporate speech. And if the culture jammers' messages are more pointedly political than their predecessors', that may be because what were indeed subversive messages in the '60s--"Never Work," "It Is Forbidden to Forbid" "Take Your Desires for Reality"--now sound more like Sprite or Nike slogans: Just Feel It. And the "situations" or "happenings" staged by the political pranksters in 1968, though genuinely shocking and disruptive at the time, are the Absolut Vodka ad of 1998--the one featuring purple-clad art school students storming bars and restaurants banging on bottles.

In 1993, Mark Dery wrote "Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing and Sniping in the Empire of Signs," a booklet published by the Open Magazine Pamphlet Series. For Dery, jamming incorporates such eclectic combinations of theater and activism as the Guerrilla Girls, who

highlighted the art world's exclusion of female artists by holding demonstrations outside the Whitney Museum in gorilla masks; Joey Skagg, who has pulled off countless successful media hoaxes; and Artflux's execution-in-effigy of archRepublican Jesse Helms on Capitol Hill. For Dery culture jamming is anything, essentially that mixes art, media, parody and the outsider stance. But within these subcultures, there has always been a tension between the forces of the merry prankster and the hardcore revolutionary. Nagging questions re-emerge: are play and pleasure themselves revolutionary acts, as the Situationists might argue? Is screwing up the culture's information flows inherently subversive, as Skagg would hold? Or is the mix of art and politics just a matter of making sure, to paraphrase Emma Goldman, that somebody has hooked up a good sound system at the revolution?

Though culture jamming is an undercurrent that never dries up entirely there is no doubt that for the last five years it has been in the midst of a revival, and one focused more on politics than on pranksterism. For a growing number of young activists, adbusting has presented itself as the perfect tool with which to register disapproval of the multinational corporations that have so aggressively stalked them as shoppers, and so unceremoniously dumped them as workers. Influenced by media theorists such as Noam Chomsky, Edward Herman, Mark Crispin Miller, Robert McChesney and Ben Bagdikian, all of whom have explored ideas about corporate control over information flows, the adbusters are writing theory on the streets, literally deconstructing corporate culture with a waterproof magic marker and a bucket of wheatpaste.

On the more radical end of the spectrum, a network of "media collectives" has emerged, decentralized and anarchic, that combine adbusting with zine publishing, pirate radio, activist video, Internet development and community activism. Chapters of the collective have popped up in Tallahassee, Fla., Boston, Seattle, Montreal and Winnipeg--often splintering off into other organizations. In London, where adbusting is called "subvertising," a new group has been formed, called the UK Subs

after the '70s punk group of the same name. And in the past two years, the real-world jammers have been joined by a global network of online "hacktivists" who carry out their raids on the Internet, mostly by breaking into corporate Web sites and leaving their own messages behind.

Jammers span a significant range of backgrounds, from purer-than-thou Marxist-anarchists who refuse interviews with "the corporate press" to those like Rodriguez de Gerada who work in the advertising industry by day (his paying job, ironically is putting up commercial signs and superstore window displays) and long to use their skills to send messages they consider constructive. Besides a fair bit of animosity between these camps, the only ideology bridging the spectrum of culture jamming is the belief that free speech is meaningless if the commercial cacophony has risen to the point that no one can hear you. "I think everyone should have their own billboard, but they don't," says Jack Napier (a pseudonym) of the Billboard Liberation Front.

More-mainstream groups have also been getting in on the action. The U.S. Teamsters have taken quite a shine to the ad jam, using it to build up support for striking workers in several recent labor disputes. For instance, Miller Brewing found itself on the receiving end of a similar jam when it laid off workers at a St. Louis plant. The Teamsters purchased a billboard that parodied a then-current Miller campaign; as Business Week reported, "Instead of two bottles of beer in a snowbank with the tagline 'Two Cold,' the ad showed two frozen workers in a snowbank labeled 'Too Cold: Miller canned 88 St. Louis workers.'" As organizer Ron

Carver says, "When you're doing this, you're threatening multimillion-dollar ad campaigns." One high-profile culture jam arrived in the fall of 1997 when the New York antitobacco lobby purchased hundreds of rooftop taxi ads to hawk "Virginia Slime" and "Cancer Country" brand cigarettes. All over Manhattan, as yellow cabs got stuck in gridlock, the jammed ads jostled with the real ones.

The rebirth of culture jamming has much to do with newly accessible

technologies that have made both the creation and the circulation of ad parodies immeasurably easier. The Internet may be bogged down with brave new forms of branding, as we have seen, but it is also crawling with sites that offer links to culture jammers in cities across North America and Europe, ad parodies for instant downloading and digital versions of original ads, which can be imported directly onto personal desktops or jammed on site. For Rodriguez de Gerada, the true revolution has been in the impact desktop publishing has had on the techniques available to ad hackers. Over the course of the last decade, he says, culture jamming has shifted "from low-tech to medium-tech to high-tech," with scanners and software programs like Photo-shop now enabling activists to match colors, fonts and materials precisely. "I know so many different techniques that make it look like the whole ad was reprinted with its new message, as opposed to somebody coming at it with a spray-paint can."

This is a crucial distinction. Where graffiti traditionally seek to leave dissonant tags on the slick face of advertising (or the "pimple on the face of the retouched cover photo of America," to use a Negativland image), Rodriguez de Gerada's messages are designed to mesh with their targets, borrowing visual legitimacy from advertising itself. Many of his "edits" have been so successfully integrated that the altered billboards look like originals, though with a message that takes viewers by surprise. Even the child's face he put up in Alphabet City--not a traditional parody jam--was digitally output on the same kind of adhesive vinyl that advertisers use to seamlessly cover buses and buildings with corporate logos. "The technology allows us to use Madison Avenue's aesthetics against itself," he says. "That is the most important aspect of this new wave of people using this guerrilla tactic, because that's what the MTV generation has become accustomed to -- everything's flashy, everything's bright and clean. If you spend time to make it cleaner it will not be dismissed."

But others hold that jamming need not be so high tech. The Toronto performance artist Jubal Brown spread the visual virus for Canada's largest billboard-busting blitz with nothing more than a magic marker.

He taught his friends how to distort the already hollowed out faces of fashion models by using a marker to black out their eyes and draw a zipper over their

Mouths--presto! Instant skull. For the women jammers in particular, "skulling" fitted in neatly with the "truth in advertising" theory: if emaciation is the beauty ideal, why not go all the way with zombie chic-- give the advertisers a few supermodels from beyond the grave? For Brown, more nihilist than feminist, skulling was simply a d[acute{e}]tournement to highlight the cultural poverty of the sponsored life. ("Buy Buy Buy! Die Die Die!" reads Brown's statement displayed in a local Toronto art gallery.) On April Fool's Day 1997, dozens of people went out on skulling missions, hitting hundreds of billboards on busy Toronto streets. Their handiwork was reprinted in Adbusters, helping to spread skulling to cities across North America.

And nobody is riding the culture-jamming wave as high as Adbusters, the self-described "house organ" of the culture-jamming scene. Editor Kalle Lasn, who speaks exclusively in the magazine's enviro-pop lingo, likes to say that we are a culture "addicted to toxins" that are poisoning our bodies, our "mental environment" and our planet. He believes that adbusting will eventually spark a "paradigm shift" in public consciousness. Published by the Vancouver-based Media Foundation, the magazine started in 1989 with 5,000 copies. It now has a circulation of 35,000--at least 20,000 copies of which go to the United States. The foundation also produces "uncommercials" for television that accuse the beauty industry of causing eating disorders, attack North American overconsumption, and urge everyone to trade their cars in for bikes. Most television stations in Canada and the U.S. have refused to air the spots, which gives the Media Foundation the perfect excuse to take them to court and use the trials to attract press attention to their vision of more democratic, publicly accessible media.

Culture jamming is enjoying a resurgence, in part because of technological advancements, but also more pertinently, because of the

good old rules of supply and demand. Something not far from the surface of the public psyche is delighted to see the icons of corporate power subverted and mocked. There is, in short, a market for it. With commercialism able to overpower the traditional authority of religion, politics and schools, corporations have emerged as the natural targets for all sorts of free-floating rage and rebellion. The new ethos that culture jamming taps into is go-for-the-corporate jugular. "States have fallen back and corporations have become the new institutions," says Jaggi Singh, a Montreal-based anticorporate activist. "People are just reacting to the iconography of our time." American labor rights activist Trim Bissell goes further, explaining that the thirsty expansion of chains like Starbucks and the aggressive branding of companies like Nike have created a climate ripe for anticorporate attacks. "There are certain corporations which market themselves so aggressively which are so intent on stamping their image on everybody and every street, that they build up a reservoir of resentment among thinking people," he says. "People resent the destruction of culture and its replacement with these mass-produced corporate logos and slogans. It represents a kind of cultural fascism."

Most of the superbrands are of course well aware that the very imagery that has generated billions for them in sales is likely to create other, unintended, waves within the culture. Well before the anti-Nike campaign began in earnest, CEO Phil Knight presciently observed that "there's a flip side to the emotions we generate and the tremendous well of emotions we live off of. Somehow, emotions imply their opposites and at the level we operate, the reaction is much more than a passing thought." The reaction is also more than the fickle flight of fashion that makes a particular style of hip sneaker suddenly look absurd, or a played-to-death pop song become, overnight, intolerable. At its best, culture jamming homes in on the flip side of those branded emotions, and refocuses them, so that they aren't replaced with a craving for the next fashion or pop sensation but turn, slowly, on the process of branding itself.

It's hard to say how spooked advertisers are about getting busted. Although the U.S. Association of National Advertisers has no qualms about lobbying police on behalf of its members to crack down on adbusters, they are generally loath to let the charges go to trial. This is probably wise. Even though ad companies try to paint jammers as "vigilante censors" in the media, they know it wouldn't take much for the public to decide that the advertisers are the ones censoring the jammers' creative expressions.

So while most big brand names rush to sue for alleged trademark violations and readily take each other to court for parodying slogans or products (as Nike did when Candies shoes adopted the slogan 'Just Screw It'), multinationals are proving markedly less eager to enter into legal battles that will clearly be fought less on legal than on political grounds. Furthermore, corporations rightly see jammers as rabid attention seekers and have learned to avoid anything that could garner media coverage for their stunts. A case in point came in 1992 when Absolut Vodka threatened to sue Adbusters over its "Absolut Nonsense" parody. The company immediately backed down when the magazine went to the press and challenged the distiller to a public debate on the harmful effects of alcohol.

And much to Negativland's surprise, Pepsi's lawyers even refrained from responding to the band's 1997 release, Dispepsi--an anti-pop album consisting of hacked, jammed, distorted and disfigured Pepsi jingles. One song mimics the ads by juxtaposing the product's name with a laundry list of random unpleasant images: "I got fired by my boss. Pepsi/I nailed Jesus to the cross. Pepsi... The ghastly stench of puppy mills. Pepsi" and so on. When asked by Entertainment Weekly magazine for its response to the album, the soft-drink giant claimed to think it was "a pretty good listen."

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