

NO LOGO



*Top: A call to Depression-era ad jammers from *The Ballyhoo*. Bottom: Two tobacco ad parodies by Ron English.*

CHAPTER TWELVE

CULTURE JAMMING

Ads Under Attack

Advertising men are indeed very unhappy these days, very nervous, with a kind of apocalyptic expectancy. Often when I have lunched with an agency friend, a half dozen worried copy writers and art directors have accompanied us. Invariably they want to know when the revolution is coming, and where will they get off if it does come.

— Ex-adman James Rorty, *Our Master's Voice*, 1934

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 thirty-one-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 ten 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 even claims to have talked cops out of arresting him on three different occasions. "I say, 'Look, look what's around here, look what's happening. Let me explain to you why I do it.'" He tells the police officer about how poor neighbourhoods have a disproportionately high number of billboards selling tobacco and hard liquor products. He talks about how these ads always feature models sailing, skiing or playing golf, making the addictive products they promote particularly glamorous to kids stuck in the ghetto, longing for escape. Unlike the advertisers who pitch and run, he wants his work to be part of a community discussion about the politics of public space.

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 — the ads discussed in "No Space," painted and projected onto sidewalks; reaching around entire buildings and buses; into schools; onto basketball courts and on the Internet. At the same time, as discussed in "No Choice," 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 thirty-by-ninety-foot 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 labour 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 skilfully 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. That's what's in his future, isn't it? Or Joe is shown about fifteen years younger than his usual swinger self (see image, page 278). 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 RJ. Reynolds reached a \$206 billion settlement with forty-six 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 (see image on page 344). My favourite 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 twenty years, while Australia's Billboard Utilizing Graffitiists 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 detournement, defined as an image, message or artefact 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 sixties, 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 sixties — "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 theatre 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 Artfux's execution-in-effigy of arch-Republican 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 hard-core 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 wheat paste.

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.

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

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 labour 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 snow bank with the tagline 'Two Cold,' the ad showed two frozen workers in a snow bank labelled '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.

"Mutiny on the Corporate Sponsor Ship"-Paper Tiger, 1997 slogan

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 Photoshop now enabling activists to match colours, 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 detournement 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 (see image, page 344). 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 over consumption,

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 labour 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 the 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,¹⁰ 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. "No one wants to be in the limelight because they are the target of community protests or boycotts," one advertising executive told Advertising Age." 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* — art 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."

Identity Politics Goes Interactive

There is a connection between the ad fatigue expressed by the jammers and the fierce salvos against media sexism, racism and homophobia that were so much in vogue when I was an undergraduate in the late eighties and early nineties. This connection is perhaps best traced through the evolving relationships that feminists have had with the ad world, particularly since the movement deserves credit for laying the groundwork for many of the current ad critiques. As Susan Douglas notes in *Where the Girls Are*, "Of all the social movements of the 1960s and '70s, none was more explicitly anti-consumerist than the women's movement. Feminists had attacked the ad campaigns for products like Pristeen and Silva Thins, and by rejecting makeup, fashion and the need for spotless floors, repudiated the very need to buy certain products at all." Furthermore, when Ms. magazine was relaunched in 1990, the editors took advertiser interference so seriously that they made the unprecedented move of banishing lucrative advertisements from their pages entirely. And the "No Comment" section — a back-page gallery of sexist ads reprinted from other publications - remains one of the highest-profile forums for adbusting.

Many female culture jammers say they first became interested in the machinations of marketing via a "Feminism 101" critique of the beauty industry. Maybe they started by scrawling "feed me" on Calvin Klein ads in bus shelters, as the skateboarding members of the all-high-school Bitch Brigade did. Or maybe they got their hands on a copy of Nomy Lamm's zine, *I'm So Fucking Beautiful*, or they stumbled onto the "Feed the Super Model" interactive game on the official RiotGrrrl Web site. Or maybe, like Toronto's Carly Stasko, they got started through grrrlly self-publishing. Twenty-one-year-old Stasko is a one-woman alternative-image factory: her pocket and backpack overflow with ad-jammed stickers, copies of her latest zine and handwritten flyers on the virtues of "guerrilla gardening." And when Stasko is not studying semiotics at the University of Toronto, planting sunflower seeds in abandoned urban lots or making her own media, she's teaching courses at local alternative schools where she shows classes of fourteen-year-olds how they too can cut and paste their own culture jams.

Stasko's interest in marketing began when she realized the degree to which contemporary definitions of female beauty —articulated largely through the media and

advertisements —were making her and her peers feel insecure and inadequate. But unlike my generation of young feminists who had dealt with similar revelations largely by calling for censorship and re-education programs, she caught the mid-nineties self-publishing craze. Still in her teens, Stasko began publishing *Uncool*, a photocopied zine crammed with collages of sliced-and-diced quizzes from women's magazines, jammed ads for tampons, manifestos on culture jamming and, in one issue, a full-page ad for Philosophy Barbie. "What came first?" Stasko's Barbie wonders. "The beauty or the myth?" and "If I break a nail, but I'm asleep, is it still a crisis?" She says that the process of making her own media, adopting the voice of the promoter and hacking into the surface of the ad culture began to weaken advertising's effect on her. "I realized that I can use the same tools the media does to promote my ideas. It took the sting out of the media for me because I saw how easy it was."

Although he is more than ten years older than Stasko, the road that led Rodriguez de Gerada to culture jamming shares some of the same twists. A founding member of the political art troop *Artflux*, he began ad-busting coincident with a wave of black and Latino community organizing against cigarette and alcohol advertising. In 1990, thirty years after the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People first lobbied cigarette companies to use more black models in their ads, a church-based movement began in several American cities that accused these same companies of exploiting black poverty by target-marketing inner cities for their lethal product. In a clear sign of the times, attention had shifted from who was in the ads to the products they sold. Reverend Calvin O. Butts of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem took his parishioners on billboard-busting blitzes during which they would paint over the cigarette and alcohol advertisements around their church. Other preachers took up the fight in Chicago, Detroit and Dallas.

Reverend Butts's ad-busting consisted of reaching up to offending billboards with long-handled paint rollers and whitewashing the ads. It was functional, but Rodriguez de Gerada decided to be more creative: to replace the companies' consumption messages with more persuasive political messages of his own. As a skilled artist, he carefully morphed the faces of cigarette models so they looked rancid and diseased. He replaced the standard Surgeon General's Warning with his own messages: "Struggle General's Warning: Blacks and Latinos are the prime scapegoats for illegal drugs, and the prime targets for legal ones."

Like many other early culture jammers, Rodriguez de Gerada soon extended his critiques beyond tobacco and alcohol ads to include rampant ad bombardment and commercialism in general, and, in many ways, he has the ambitiousness of branding itself to thank for this political evolution. As inner-city kids began stabbing each other for their Nike, Polo, Hilfiger and Nautica gear, it became clear that tobacco and alcohol companies are not the only marketers that prey on poor children's longing for escape. As we have seen, these fashion labels sold disadvantaged kids so successfully on their exaggerated representations of the good life—the country club, the yacht, the superstar celebrity — that logowear has become, in some parts of the Global City, both talisman and weapon. Meanwhile, the young feminists of Carly Stasko's generation whose sense of injustice had been awakened by Naomi Wolf's *Beauty Myth*, and Jean Kilbourne's

documentary *Killing Us Softly*, also lived through the feeding frenzies around "alternative," Gen-X, hip-hop and rave culture. In the process, many became vividly aware that marketing affects communities not only by stereotyping them, but also — and equally powerfully - by hyping and chasing after them. This was a tangible shift from one generation of feminists to the next. When *Ms.* went ad-free in 1990, for instance, there was a belief that the corrosive advertising interference from which Gloria Steinem and Robin Morgan were determined to free their publication was a specifically female problem. But as the politics of identity mesh with the burgeoning critique of corporate power, the demand has shifted from reforming problematic ad campaigns to questioning whether advertisers have any legitimate right to invade every nook and cranny of our mental and physical environment: it has become about the disappearance of space and the lack of meaningful choice. Ad culture has demonstrated its remarkable ability to absorb, accommodate and even profit from content critiques. In this context, it has become abundantly clear that the only attack that will actually shake this resilient industry is one levelled not at the pretty people in the pictures, but against the corporations that paid for them.

So for Carly Stasko, marketing has become more an environmental than a gender or self-esteem issue, and her environment is the streets, the university campus and the mass-media culture in which she, as an urbanite, lives her life. "I mean, this is my environment," she says, "and these ads are really directed at me. If these images can affect me, then I can affect them back."

The Washroom Ad as Political Catalyst

For many students coming of age in the late nineties, the turning point from focusing on the content of advertising to a preoccupation with the form itself occurred in the most private of places: in their university washrooms, staring at a car ad. The washroom ads first began appearing on North American campuses in 1997 and have been proliferating ever since. As we have already seen in Chapter 5, the administrators who allowed ads to creep onto their campuses told themselves that young people were already so bombarded with commercial messages that a few more wouldn't kill them, and the revenues would help fund valuable programs. But it seems there is such a thing as an ad that breaks the camel's back — and for many students, that was it.

The irony, of course, is that from the advertiser's perspective, niche nirvana had been attained. Short of eyelid implants, ads in college washrooms represent as captive a youth market as there is on earth. But from the students' perspective, there could have been no more literal metaphor for space closing in than an ad for Pizza Pizza or Chrysler Neon staring at them from over a urinal or from the door of a W.C. cubicle. Which is precisely why this misguided branding scheme created the opportunity for hundreds of North American students to take their first tentative steps toward direct Anticorporate activism.

Looking back, school officials must see that there is something hilariously misguided about putting ads in private cubicles where students have been known to pull out their pens or eyeliners and scrawl desperate declarations of love, circulate unsubstantiated rumours, carry on the abortion debate and share deep philosophical insights. When the mini-billboards arrived, the bathroom became the first truly safe space in which to talk

back to ads. In an instant, the direction of the scrutiny through the one-way glass of the focus group was reversed, and the target market took aim at the people behind the glass. The most creative response came from students at the University of Toronto. A handful of undergraduates landed part-time jobs with the washroom billboard company and kept conveniently losing the custom-made screwdrivers that opened the four hundred plastic frames. Pretty soon, a group calling themselves the Escher Appreciation Society were breaking into the "student-proof frames and systematically replacing the bathroom ads with prints by Maurits Cornelis Escher. Rather than brushing up on the latest from Chrysler or Molson, students could learn to appreciate the Dutch graphic artist — chosen, the Escherites conceded, because his geometric work photocopied well.

The bathroom ads made it unmistakably clear to a generation of student activists that they don't need cooler, more progressive or more diverse ads — first and foremost, they need ads to shut up once in a while. Debate on campuses began to shift away from an evaluation of the content of ads to the fact that it was becoming impossible to escape from advertising's intrusive gaze.

Of course there are those among the culture jammers whose interest in advertising is less tapped into the new ethos of anti-branding rage and instead has much in common with the morality squads of the political correctness years. At times, *Adbusters* magazine feels like an only slightly hipper version of a Public Service Announcement about saying no to peer pressure or remembering to Reduce, Reuse and Recycle. The magazine is capable of lacerating wit, but its attacks on nicotine, alcohol and fast-food joints can be repetitive and obvious. Jams that change Absolut Vodka to "Absolut Hangover" or Ultra Kool cigarettes to "Utter Fool" cigarettes are enough to turn off would-be supporters who see the magazine crossing a fine line between information-age civil disobedience and puritanical finger-waving. Mark Dery, author of the original culture-jammers' manifesto and a former contributor to the magazine, says the anti-booze, -smoking and -fast-food emphasis reads as just plain patronizing —as if "the masses" cannot be trusted to "police their own desires."

Listening to the Marketer Within

In a *New Yorker* article entitled "The Big Sell-out," author John Seabrook discusses the phenomenon of "the marketer within." He argues persuasively that an emerging generation of artists will not concern themselves with old ethical dilemmas like "selling out" since they are a walking sales pitch for themselves already, intuitively understanding how to produce pre-packaged art, to be their own brand. "The artists of the next generation will make their art with an internal marketing barometer already in place. The auteur as marketer, the artist in a suit of his own: the ultimate in vertical integration."

Seabrook is right in his observation that the rhythm of the pitch is hardwired into the synapses of many young artists, but he is mistaken in assuming that the built-in marketing barometer will only be used to seek fame and fortune in the culture industries. As Carly Stasko points out, many people who grew up sold are so attuned to the tempo of marketing that as soon as they read or hear a new slogan, they begin to flip it and play with it in their minds, as she herself does. For Stasko, it is the adbuster that is within, and

every ad campaign is a riddle just waiting for the right jam. So the skill Seabrook identifies, which allows artists to write the press bumpf for their own gallery openings and musicians to churn out metaphor-filled bios for their liner notes, is the same quality that makes for a deadly clever culture jammer. The culture jammer is the activist artist as antimarketer, using a childhood filled with Trix commercials, and an adolescence spent spotting the product placement on Seinfeld, to mess with a system that once saw itself as a specialized science. Jamie Batsy, a Toronto-area "hacktivist," puts it like this: "Advertisers and other opinion makers are now in a position where they are up against a generation of activists that were watching television before they could walk. This generation wants their brains back and mass media is their home turf."

Culture jammers are drawn to the world of marketing like moths to a flame, and the high-gloss sheen on their work is achieved precisely because they still feel an affection — however deeply ambivalent — for media spectacle and the mechanics of persuasion. "I think a lot of people who are really interested in subverting advertising or studying advertising probably, at one time, wanted to be ad people themselves," says Carrie McLaren, editor of the New York zine Stay Free/21 You can see it in her own ad busts, which are painstakingly seamless in their design and savage in their content. In one issue, a full-page anti-ad shows a beat-up kid face down on the concrete with no shoes on. In the corner of the frame is a hand making away with his Nike sneakers. "Just do it," the slogan says.

Nowhere is the adbuster's ear for the pitch used to fuller effect than in the promotion of adbusting itself, a fact that might explain why culture jamming's truest believers often sound like an odd cross between used-car salesmen and tenured semiotics professors. Second only to Internet hucksters and rappers, adbusters are susceptible to a spiralling bravado and to a level of self-promotion that can be just plain silly. There is much fondness for claiming to be Marshall McLuhan's son, daughter, grandchild or bastard progeny. There is a strong tendency to exaggerate the power of wheat paste and a damn good joke. And to overstate their own power: one culture-jamming manifesto, for instance, explains that "the billboard artist's goal is to throw a well aimed spanner into the media's gears, bringing the image factory to a shuddering halt."

Adbusters has taken this hard-sell approach to such an extreme that it has raised hackles among rival culture jammers. Particularly galling to its critics is the magazine's line of anticonsumer products that they say has made the magazine less a culture-jamming clearinghouse than a home-shopping network for adbusting accessories. Culture-jammer "tool boxes" are listed for sale: posters, videos, stickers and postcards; most ironically, it used to sell calendars and T-shirts to coincide with Buy Nothing Day, though better sense eventually prevailed. "What comes out is no real alternative to our culture of consumption," Carrie McLaren writes. "Just a different brand." Fellow Vancouver jammers Guerrilla Media (GM) take a more vicious shot at Adbusters in the GM inaugural newsletter. "We promise there are no GM calendars, key chains or coffee mugs in the offing. We are, however, still working on those T-shirts that some of you ordered — we're just looking for that perfect sweatshop to produce them."

Marketing the Antimarketers

The attacks are much the same as those lobbed at every punk band that signs a record deal and every zine that goes glossy: Adjusters has simply become too popular to have much cachet for the radicals who once dusted it off in their local second-hand bookstore like a precious stone. But beyond the standard-issue purism, the question of how best to "market" an antimarketing movement is a uniquely thorny dilemma. There is a sense among some adbusters that culture jamming, like punk itself, must remain something of a porcupine; that to defy its own inevitable commodification, it must keep its protective quills sharp. After the great Alternative and Girl Power™ cash-ins, the very process of naming a trend, or coining a catchphrase, is regarded by some with deep suspicion. "Adbusters jumped on it and were ready to claim this movement before it ever really existed," says McLaren, who complains bitterly in her own writing about the "USA Today/MTV-ization" of Adbusters. "It's become an advertisement for anti-advertising."

There is another fear underlying this debate, one more confusing for its proponents than the prospect of culture jamming "selling out" to the dictates of marketing. What if, despite all the rhetorical flair its adherents can muster, culture jamming doesn't actually matter? What if there is no jujitsu, only semiotic shadowboxing? Kalle Lasn insists that his magazine has the power to "jolt post-modern society out of its media trance" and that his uncommercials threaten to shake network television to its core. "The television mindscape has been homogenized over the last 30 to 40 years. It's a space that is very safe for commercial messages. So, if you suddenly introduce a note of cognitive dissonance with a spot that says 'Don't buy a car,' or in the middle of a fashion show somebody suddenly says 'What about anorexia?' there's a powerful moment of truth." But the real truth is that, as a culture, we seem to be capable of absorbing limitless amounts of cognitive dissonance on our TV sets. We culture jam manually every time we channel surf—catapulting from the desperate fundraising pleas of the Foster Parent Plan to infomercials for Buns of Steel; from Jerry Springer to Jerry Falwell; from Mew Country to Marilyn Manson. In these information-numb times, we are beyond being abruptly awakened by a startling image, a sharp juxtaposition or even a fabulously clever detournement.

Jaggi Singh is one activist who has become disillusioned with the jujitsu theory. "When you're jamming, you're sort of playing their game, and I think ultimately that playing field is stacked against us because they can saturate... we don't have the resources to do all those billboards, we don't have the resources to buy up all that time, and in a sense, it almost becomes pretty scientific—who can afford these feeds?"

Logo Overload

To add further evidence that culture jamming is more drop in the bucket than spanner in the works, marketers are increasingly deciding to join in the fun. When Kalle Lasn says culture jamming has the feeling of "a bit of a fad," he's not exaggerating. 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.

Yahoo! already has an official culture-jamming site on the Internet, filed under "alternative." At Soho Down & Under on West Broadway in New York, Camden Market in London or any other high street where alterno gear is for sale, you can load up on logo-jammed T-shirts, stickers and badges. Recurring detournements — to use a word that seems suddenly misplaced — include Kraft changed to "Krap," Tide changed to "Jive," Ford changed to "Fucked" and Goodyear changed to "Goodbeer." It's not exactly trenchant social commentary, particularly since the jammed logos appear to be interchangeable with the corporate kitsch of unaltered Dubble Bubble and Tide T-shirts. In the rave scene, logo play is all the rage in clothing, temporary tattoos, body paint and even ecstasy pills. Ecstasy dealers have taken to branding their tablets with famous logos: there is Big Mac E, Purple Nike Swirl E, X-Files E, and a mixture of uppers and downers called a "Happy Meal." Musician Jeff Renton explains the drug culture's appropriation of corporate logos as a revolt against invasive marketing. "I think it's a matter of: 'You come into our lives with your million-dollar advertising campaigns putting logos in places that make us feel uncomfortable, so we're going to take your logo back and use it in places that make you feel uncomfortable,'" he says.

But after a while, what began as a way to talk back to the ads starts to feel more like evidence of our total colonization by them, and especially because the ad industry is proving that it is capable of cutting off the culture jammers at the pass. Examples of pre-jammed ads include a 1997 Nike campaign that used the slogan "I am not/A target market/I am an athlete" and Sprite's "Image Is Nothing" campaign, featuring a young black man saying that all his life he has been bombarded with media lies telling him that soft drinks will make him a better athlete or more attractive, until he realized that "image is nothing." Diesel jeans, however, has gone furthest in incorporating the political content of adbusting's Anticorporate attacks. One of the most popular ways for artists and activists to highlight the inequalities of free-market globalization is by juxtaposing First World icons with Third World scenes: Marlboro Country in the war-torn rubble of Beirut (see image, page 10); an obviously malnourished Haitian girl wearing Mickey Mouse glasses; Dynasty playing on a TV set in an African hut; Indonesian students rioting in front of McDonald's arches. The power of these visual critiques of happy one-worldism is precisely what the Diesel clothing company's "Brand 0" ad campaign attempts to co-opt. The campaign features ads within ads: a series of billboards flogging a fictional Brand 0 line of products in a nameless North Korean city. In one, a glamorous skinny blonde is pictured on the side of a bus that is overflowing with frail-looking workers. The ad is selling "Brand 0 Diet —There's no limit to how thin you can get." Another shows an Asian man huddled under a piece of cardboard. Above him towers a Ken and Barbie Brand 0 billboard.

Perhaps the point of no return came in 1997 when Mark Hosier of Negativ-land received a call from the ultra-hip ad agency Wieden & Kennedy asking if the band that coined the term "culture jamming" would do the soundtrack for a new Miller Genuine Draft commercial. The decision to turn down the request and the money was simple enough, but it still sent him spinning. "They utterly failed to grasp that our entire work is essentially in opposition to everything that they are connected to, and it made me really depressed because I had thought that our aesthetic couldn't be absorbed into marketing," Hosier says. Another rude awakening came when Hosier first saw Sprite's "Obey Your Thirst" campaign. "That commercial was a hair's breadth away from a song

on our [Dispepsi] record. It was surreal. It's not just the fringe that's getting absorbed now—that's always happened. What's getting absorbed now is the idea that there's no opposition left, that any resistance is futile." "

I'm not so sure. Yes, some marketers have found a way to distill! culture jamming into a particularly edgy kind of nonlinear advertising, and there is no doubt that Madison Avenue's embrace of the techniques of adbusting has succeeded in moving product off the superstore shelves. Since Diesel began its aggressively ironic "Reasons for Living" and "Brand 0" campaigns in the U.S., sales have gone from \$2 million to \$23 million in four years,³⁰ and the Sprite "Image Is Nothing" campaign is credited with a 35 percent rise in sales in just three years." That said, the success of these individual campaigns has done nothing to disarm the antimarketing rage that fuelled adbusting in the first place. In fact, it may be having the opposite effect.

Ground Zero of the Cool Hunt

The prospect of young people turning against the hype of advertising and defining themselves against the big brands is a continuous threat coming from cool-hunting agencies like Sputnik, that infamous team of professional diary readers and generational snoops. "Intellectual crews," as Sputnik calls thinking young people, are aware and resentful of how useful they are to the marketers:

They understand that mammoth corporations now seek their approval to continually deliver goods that will translate to megasales in the mainstream. Their stance of being intellectual says to each other, and to themselves, and most importantly to marketers — who spend innumerable dollars for in-your-face this-is-what-you-need advertisements — that they cannot be bought or fooled anymore by the hype. Being a head means that you won't sell out and be told what to wear, what to buy, what to eat or how to speak by anyone (or anything) other than yourself.' 2

But while the Sputnik writers inform their corporate readers about the radical ideas on the street, they appear to think that though these ideas will dramatically influence how young people will party, dress and talk, they will magically have no effect whatsoever on how young people will behave as political beings.

After they sound the alarm, the hunters always reassure their readers that all this Anticorporate stuff is actually a meaningless pose that can be worked around with a hipper, edgier campaign. In other words, Anticorporate rage is no more meaningful a street trend than a mild preference for the colour orange. The happy underlying premise of the cool hunters' reports is that despite all the punk-rock talk, there is no belief that is a true belief and there are no rebels who cannot be tamed with an ad campaign or by a street promoter who really speaks to them. The unquestioned assumption is that there is no end point in this style cycle. There will always be new spaces to colonize— whether physical or mental —and there will always be an ad that will be able to penetrate the latest strain of consumer cynicism. Nothing new is taking place, the hunters tell each other: marketers have always extracted symbols and signs from the resistance movements of their day.

What they don't say is that previous waves of youth resistance were focused primarily on such foes as "the establishment," the government, the patriarchy and the military-industrial complex. Culture jamming is different—its rage encompasses the very type of marketing that the cool hunters and their clients are engaging in as they try to figure out how to use anti-marketing rage to sell products. The big brands' new ads must incorporate a youth cynicism not about products as status symbols, or about mass homogenization, but about multinational brands themselves as tireless culture vultures.

The admen and adwomen have met this new challenge without changing their course. They are busily hunting down and reselling the edge, just as they have always done, which is why Wieden & Kennedy thought there was nothing strange about asking Negativland to shill for Miller. After all, it was Wieden & Kennedy, a boutique ad agency based in Portland, Oregon, that made Nike a feminist sneaker. It was W&K who dreamed up the post-industrial alienation marketing plan for Coke's OK Cola; W&K who gave the world the immortal plaid-clad assertion that the Subaru Impreza was "like punk rock"; and it was W&K who brought Miller Beer into the age of irony. Masters at pitting the individual against various incarnations of mass-market bogeymen, Wieden & Kennedy sold cars to people who hated car ads, shoes to people who loathed image, soft drinks to the Prozac Nation and, most of all, ads to people who were "not a target market."

The agency was founded by two self-styled "beatnik artists," Dan Wieden and David Kennedy, whose technique, it seems, for quieting their own nagging fears that they were selling out has consistently been to drag the ideas and icons of the counterculture with them into the ad world. A quick tour through the agency's body of work is nothing short of a counterculture reunion—Woodstock meets the Beats meets Warhol's Factory. After putting Lou Reed in a Honda spot in the mid-eighties, W&K used the Beatles anthem "Revolution" in one Nike commercial, then carted out John Lennon's "Instant Karma" for another. They also paid proto-rock-and-roller Bo Diddley to do the "Bo Knows" Nike spots, and filmmaker Spike Lee to do an entire series of Air Jordan ads. W&K even got Jean-Luc Godard to direct a European Nike commercial. There were still more countercultural artefacts lying around: they stuck William Burroughs's face in a mini-TV-set in another Nike commercial and designed a campaign, nixed by Subaru before it made it to air, that used Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* as the voice-over text for an SVX commercial.

After making its name on the willingness of the avant-garde to set its price for the right mix of irony and dollars, W&K can hardly be blamed for thinking that culture jammers would also be thrilled to take part in the post-modern fun of a self-aware ad campaign. But the backlash against the brands, of which culture jamming is only one part, isn't about vague notions of alternativeness battling the mainstream. It has to do with the specific issues that have been the subject of this book so far: the loss of public space, corporate censorship and unethical labour practices, to name but three-issues less easily digested than tasty morsels like Girl Power and grunge.

Which is why Wieden & Kennedy hit a wall when they asked Negativland to mix for Miller, and why that was only the first in a string of defeats for the agency. The British political pop-band Chumbawamba turned down a \$1.5 million contract that would have allowed Nike to use its hit song "Tub-thumping" in a World Cup spot. Abstract notions about

staying indie were not at issue (the band did allow the song to be used in the soundtrack for Home Alone 3; at the centre of their rejection was Nike's use of sweatshop labour. "It took everybody in the room under 30 seconds to say no," said band member Alice Nutter. The political poet Martin Espada also got a call from one of Nike's smaller agencies, inviting him to take part in the "Nike Poetry Slam." If he accepted, he would be paid \$2,500 and his poem would be read in a thirty-second commercial during the 1998 Winter Olympics in Nagano. Espada turned the agency down flat, offering up a host of reasons and ending with this one: "Ultimately, however, I am rejecting your offer as a protest against the brutal labour practices of the company. I will not associate myself with a company that engages in the well-documented exploitation of workers in sweatshops." The rudest awakening came with Wieden & Kennedy's cleverest of schemes: in May 1999, with labour scandals still hanging over the swoosh, the agency approached Ralph Nader —the consumer-rights movement's most powerful leader and a folk hero for his attacks on multinational corporations — and asked him to do a Nike ad. The idea was simple: Nader would get \$25,000 for holding up an Air 120 sneaker and saying, "Another shameless attempt by Nike to sell shoes." A letter sent to Nader's office from Nike headquarters explained that "what we are asking is for Ralph, as the country's most prominent consumer advocate, to take a light-hearted jab at us. This is a very Nike-like thing to do in our ads." Nader, never known for being light of heart, would only say, "Look at the gall of these guys."

It was indeed a very Nike-like thing to do. Ads co-opt out of reflex — they do so because consuming is what consumer culture does. Madison Avenue is generally not too picky about what it will swallow, it doesn't avoid poison directed against itself but rather, as Wieden & Kennedy have shown, chomps down on whatever it finds along the path as it looks for the new "edge." The scenario that it appears unwilling to consider is that its admen and adwomen, the perennial teenage followers, may finally be following their target market off a cliff.

Adbusting in the Thirties: "Become a Toucher Upper!"

Of course the ad industry has disarmed backlashes before — from women complaining of sexism, gays claiming invisibility, ethnic minorities tired of gross caricatures. And that's not all. In the 1950s and again in the 1970s, Western consumers became obsessed with the idea that they were being fooled by advertisers through the covert use of subliminal techniques. In 1957, Vance Packard published the runaway best-seller *The Hidden Persuaders*, which shocked Americans with allegations that social scientists were packing advertisements with messages invisible to the human eye. The issue re-emerged in 1973, when Wilson Bryan Key published *Subliminal Seduction*, a study of the lascivious messages tucked away in ice cubes. Key was so transported by his discovery that he made such bold claims as "the subliminal promise to anyone buying Gilbey's gin is simply a good old-fashioned sexual orgy."

But all these antimarketing spasms had one thing in common: they focused exclusively on the content and techniques of advertising. These critics didn't want to be subliminally manipulated — and they did want African Americans in their cigarette ads and gays and lesbians selling jeans. Because the concerns were so specific, they were relatively easy for

the ad world to address or absorb. For instance, the charge of hidden messages harboured in ice cubes, and other carefully cast shadows, spawned an irony-laden advertising subgenre that design historians Ellen Luton and J. Abbot Miller term "meta-subliminal" —ads that parody the charge that ads send secret messages. In 1990, Absolut Vodka launched the "Absolut Subliminal" campaign which showed a glass of vodka on the rocks with the word "absolut" clearly screened into the ice cubes. Seagram's and Tanqueray gin followed with their own subliminal in-jokes, as did the cast of Saturday Night Live with the recurring character Subliminal Man.

The critiques of advertising that have traditionally come out of academe have been equally unthreatening, though for different reasons. Most such criticism focuses not on the effects of marketing on public space, cultural freedom and democracy, but rather on ads' persuasive powers over seemingly clueless people. For the most part, marketing theory concentrates on the way ads implant false desires in the consuming public — making us buy things that are bad for us, pollute the planet or impoverish our souls. "Advertising," as George Orwell once said, "is the rattling of a stick inside a swill bucket." When such is the theorist's opinion of the public, it is no wonder that there is little potential for redemption in most media criticism: this sorry populace will never be in possession of the critical tools it needs to formulate a political response to marketing mania and media synergy.

The future is even bleaker for those academics who use advertising criticism for a thinly veiled attack on "consumer culture." As James Twitchell writes in *Adcult USA*, most advertising criticism reeks of contempt for the people who "want —ugh! —things." Such a theory can never hope to form the intellectual foundation of an actual resistance movement against the branded life, since genuine political empowerment cannot be reconciled with a belief system that regards the public as a bunch of ad-fed cattle, held captive under commercial culture's hypnotic spell. What's the point of going through the trouble of trying to knock down the fence? Everyone knows the branded cows will just stand there looking dumb and chewing cud.

Interestingly, the last time that there was a successful attack on the practice of advertising — rather than a disagreement on its content or techniques — was during the Great Depression. In the 1930s the very idea of the happy, stable consumer society portrayed in advertising provoked a wave of resentment from the millions of Americans who found themselves on the outside of the dream of prosperity. An anti-advertising movement emerged that attacked ads not for faulty imagery but as the most public face of a deeply faulty economic system. People weren't incensed by the pictures in the ads, but rather by the cruelty of the obviously false promise that they represented — the lie of the American Dream that the happy consumer lifestyle was accessible to all. In the late twenties, and through the thirties, the frivolous promises of the ad world made for stomach-wrenching juxtapositions with the casualties of economic collapse, setting the stage for an unparalleled wave of consumer activism.

There was a short-lived magazine published in New York called *The Ballyhoo*, a sort of Depression-era *Adbusters*. In the wake of the 1929 stock-market crash, *The Ballyhoo* arrived as a cynical new voice, viciously mocking the "creative psychiatry" of cigarette and mouthwash ads, as well as the outright quackery used to sell all kinds of potions and

lotions. The Ballyhoo was an instant success, reaching a circulation of more than 1.5 million in 1931. James Rorty, a 1920s Mad Ave adman turned revolutionary socialist, explained the new magazine's appeal: "Whereas the stock in trade of the ordinary mass or class consumer magazine is reader-confidence in advertising, the stock in trade of Ballyhoo was reader-disgust with advertising, and with high-pressure salesmanship in general.... Ballyhoo, in turn, parasites on the grotesque, bloated body of advertising."

Ballyhoo's culture jams include "Scramel" cigarettes ("they're so fresh they're insulting"), or the line of "different Zilch creams: What the well greased girls will wear. Absolutely indispensable (Ask any dispensary)." The editors encouraged readers to move beyond their snickers and go out and bust bothersome billboards themselves. A fake ad for the "Twitch Toucher Upper School" shows a drawing of a woman who has just painted a moustache on a glamorous cigarette model. The caption reads, "Become a Toucher Upper!" and goes on to say: "If you long to mess up advertisement: if your heart cries out to paint pipes in the mouths of beautiful ladies, try this 10-second test NOW! Our graduates make their marks all over the world! Good Toucher Uppers are always in demand" (see image on page 278). The magazine also created fake products to skewer the hypocrisy of the Hoover administration, like the "Lady Pippel Bedsheet De Luxe" — made extra long to snugly fit on park benches when you become homeless. Or the "smilette" - two hooks that clamp on to either side of the mouth and force a happy expression. "Smile away the Depression! Smile us into Prosperity!"

The hard-core culture jammers of the era were not the Ballyhoo humorists, however, but photographers like Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange and Margaret Bourke-White. These political documentarians latched on to the hypocrisies of ad campaigns such as the National Association of Manufacturers' "There's No Way Like the American Way" by highlighting the harsh visual contrasts between the ads and the surrounding landscape. A popular technique was photographing billboards with slogans like "World's Highest Standard of Living" in their actual habitat: hanging surreally over breadlines and tenements. The manic grinning models piled into the family sedan were clearly blind to the tattered masses and squalid conditions below. The photographers of the era also scrupulously documented the fragility of the capitalist system by picturing fallen businessmen holding up "Will Work for Food" signs in the shadow of looming Coke billboards and peeling hoardings. In 1934, advertisers began to use self-parody to deal with the mounting criticism they faced, a tactic that some saw as proof of the industry's state of disrepair. "It is contended by the broadcasters, and doubtless also by the movie producers, that this burlesque sales promotion takes the curse out of sales talk, and this is probably true to a degree," writes Rorty of the self-mockery. "But the prevalence of the trend gives rise to certain ominous suspicions... When the burlesque comedian mounts the pulpit of the Church of Advertising, it may be legitimately suspected that the edifice is doomed; that it will shortly be torn down or converted to secular uses."

Of course the edifice survived, though not unscathed. New Deal politicians, under pressure from a wide range of populist movements, imposed lasting reforms on the industry. The adbusters and social documentary photographers were part of a massive grassroots public revolt against big business that included the farmers' uprising against the proliferation of supermarket chains, the establishing of consumer purchasing cooperatives, the rapid expansion of a network of trade unions and a crackdown on

garment industry sweatshops (which had seen the ranks of the two U.S. garment workers' unions swell from 40,000 in 1931 to more than 300,000 in 1933). Most of all, the early ad critics were intimately linked to the burgeoning consumer movement that had been catalyzed by *One Hundred Million Guinea Pigs: Dangers in Everyday Foods, Drugs and Cosmetics* (1933), by F.J. Schlink and Arthur Kallet, and *Your Money's Worth: A Study in the Waste of the Consumer Dollar* (1927), written by Stuart Chase and F.J. Schlink. These books presented exhaustive catalogs of the way regular folks were getting lied to, cheated, poisoned and ripped off by America's captains of industry. The authors founded Consumer Research (later splintered off into the Consumers Union), which served both as an independent product-testing laboratory and a political group that lobbied the government for better grading and labelling of products. The CR believed objective testing and truthful labelling could make marketing so irrelevant it would become obsolete. According to Chase and Schlink's logic, if consumers had access to careful scientific research that compared the relative merits of the products on the market, everyone would simply make measured, rational decisions about what to buy. The advertisers, of course, were beside themselves, and terrified of the following F.J. Schlink had built up on the college campuses and among the New York intelligentsia. As adman C.B. Larrabee noted in 1934, "Some forty or fifty thousand persons won't so much as buy a box of dog biscuits unless F.J. gives his 'O.K.'... obviously they think most advertisers are dishonest, double-dealing shysters."

Schlink and Chase's rationalist Utopia of Spock-like consumerism never came to fruition, but their lobbying did force governments around the world to move to outlaw blatantly false claims in advertising, to establish quality standards for consumer goods, and to become actively involved in the grading and labelling of them. And the Consumers Union Reports is still the buyer's bible in America, though it long ago severed its ties to other social movements.

It is worth noting that the modern-day ad world's most extreme attempts to co-opt Anticorporate rage have fed directly off images pioneered by the Depression-era documentary photographers. Diesel's Brand 0 is almost a direct replica of Margaret Bourke-White's "American Way" billboard series, both in style and composition. And when the Bank of Montreal ran an ad campaign in Canada in the late nineties, at the height of a popular backlash against soaring bank profits, it used images that recalled Walker Evans's photographs of 1930s businessmen holding up those "Will Work for Food" signs. The bank's campaign consisted of a series of grainy black-and-white photographs of ragged-looking people holding signs that asked, "Will I ever own my own home?" and "Are we going to be okay?" One sign simply read, "The little guy is on his own." The television spots blasted Depression-era gospel and ragtime over eerie industrial images of abandoned freight trains and dusty towns.

In other words, when the time came to fight fire with fire, the advertisers raced back to an era when they were never more loathed and only a world war could save them. It seems that this kind of psychic shock—a clothing company using the very images that have scarred the clothing industry; a bank trading on anti-bank rage - is the only technique left that will get the attention of us ad-resistant roaches. And this may well be true, from a marketing point of view, but there is also a larger context that reaches beyond imagery: Diesel produces many of its garments in Indonesia and other parts of the Far East,

profiting from the very disparities illustrated in its clever Brand 0 ads. In fact, part of the edginess of the campaign is the clear sense that the company is flirting with a Nike-style public-relations meltdown. So far, the Diesel brand does not have a wide enough market reach to feel the full force of having its images slingshot back at its body corporate, but the bigger the company gets — and it is getting bigger every year — the more vulnerable it becomes.

That was the lesson in the responses to the Bank of Montreal's "Sign of the Times" campaign. The bank's use of powerful images of economic collapse at exactly the same time that it announced record profits of \$986 million (up in 1998 to \$1.3 billion) inspired a spontaneous wave of adusting. The simple imagery of the campaign — people holding up angry signs — was easy for the bank's critics to replicate with parodies that skewered the bank's exorbitant service fees, its inaccessible loans officers and the closing of branches in low-income neighbourhoods (after all, the bank's technique had been stolen from the activists in the first place). Everyone got in on the action: lone jammers, CBC television's satirical show *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, *The Globe and Mail's* Report on Business Magazine, and independent video collectives.

Clearly, these ad campaigns are tapping into powerful emotions. But by playing on sentiments that are already directed against them — for example, public resentment at profiteering banks or widening economic disparities — the process of co-optation runs the very real risk of amplifying the backlash, not disarming it. Above all, imagery appropriation appears to radicalize culture jammers and other Anticorporate activists — a "co-opt this!" stance develops that becomes even harder to diffuse. For instance, when Chrysler ran a campaign of pre-jammed Neon ads (the one that added a faux aerosol "p," changing "Hi" to "Hip"), it inspired the Billboard Liberation Front to go on its biggest tear in years. The BLF defaced dozens of Bay Area Neon billboards by further altering "Hip" to "Hype," and adding, for good measure, a skull and crossbones. "We can't sit by while these companies co-opt our means of communication," Jack Napier said. "Besides...they're tacky."

Perhaps the gravest miscalculation on the part of both markets and media is the insistence on seeing culture jamming solely as harmless satire, a game that exists in isolation from a genuine political movement or ideology. Certainly for some jammers, parody is perceived, in rather grandiose fashion, as a powerful end in itself. But for many more, as we will see in the next chapters, it is simply a new tool for packaging Anticorporate salvos, one that is more effective than most at breaking through the media barrage. And as we will also see, adbusters are currently at work on many different fronts: the people scaling billboards are frequently the same ones who are organizing against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment, staging protests on the streets of Geneva against the World Trade Organization and occupying banks to protest against the profits they are making from student debts. Adbusting is not an end in itself. It is simply a tool - one among many- that is being used, loaned and borrowed in a much broader political movement against the branded life.