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Response: Steven Heller - The Underground Mainstream

In his 2008 essay, *The Underground Mainstream*, Steven Heller discusses commercial or mainstream culture regularly appropriates the aesthetics of underground movements. Even though several of these movements began as a rebellion against that very culture. He also points out that there some underground movements have used commercial aesthetics in their attempts to disturb the status quo with its own material. This relationship between the underground and mainstream is not unique to any time period or industry. Heller explains that followers are drawn to rebellion and that once an underground movement gains momentum and attention it gets snatched up by advertisers and fed back to the world as an over-saturated caricature of itself, which ultimately removes from the original message. Then they congratulate themselves on being so intelligent and “with it” in releasing work that speaks to society’s “hidden truths.” This can be seen today in the now commercialized and corporate-sponsored formerly underground movement of Gay Pride™. Not to mention the aesthetics of gay culture as a whole being taken by everyone else since forever. But even that rebellion is modeled after others that came before it. This has become a long chain of repeat offenses from both sides, and consumers are in the middle, grabbing at what they can, hoping to align themselves with like-minded individuals.

Contemporary designers and all humans should continuously strive to communicate responsibly, especially now that we see the result of repackaging and oversaturating. This means if you choose to use the aesthetic of underground culture, and we now have so very much to choose from, you should educate yourself on it. You should be doing it because you truly believe in the tactics of the movement, not using it as a ploy to be “down with the youth.” The marginalized communities that these movements come from should be

considered since underground movements are born in retaliation to a norm of society that, although widely accepted, is damaging to certain groups in that society. Replication can be very damaging when not used in the proper context and that is grossly irresponsible. Although the internet may be a sprawling cesspool of ill-advised revelation it is also full of information that can be useful when trying to make responsible design choices.

The feminist artist and activist group, The Guerilla Girls, have been making responsible aesthetic choices since their start in the late 80s. They wear gorilla masks in public and go by the names of famous dead women, this keeps their actual identities out of the issues. This helps to avoid the exploitation of their message: that discrimination will not be tolerated, especially in the art world. They target people and institutions that are responsible for sharing art with the public (this includes museums, boards of directors, galleries, and art dealers) and calls attention to their discrimination by using humor and data displayed in a mixture of advertising (mainstream) and activist (underground) aesthetics. Their inspiration can be traced as far back as 1775 and the guerilla warfare tactics of American Patriots, made of small independent groups fighting against larger organized forces. Other inspiration came from groups like Women Artists in Revolution (WAR), Art Workers Coalition, and the Guerilla Art Action Group (GAAG), who similarly protested the lack of representation for women and people of color.

Although the Guerrilla Girls first started as an activist group, they've been embraced by the same institutions that they protested against and have shown their work in galleries such as MoMa and Tate Modern. But in cases where this embrace might be seen as damaging to the effectiveness of an underground group, they reconcile their popularity by never losing sight of their main purpose and using that popularity to their advantage. In an issue of Interview Magazine from 2012 they said, "What do you do when the art world you've spent

your whole life attacking suddenly embraces you? Well... you take your critique right inside the joint. We dissed MoMA at its own symposium on feminism. We criticized the Tate Modern and the Istanbul Modern.... The response? After we made fun of the National Gallery of Art, they vowed to change their ways. Ditto the Tate Modern and MoMA.” It’s amazing when the force you are fighting against gives you an even larger platform to communicate your message against them. Plus, for the Guerilla Girls, this embrace helped foster actual change in the museums. This is unfortunately not the case for all underground movements that struggle under the grip of the mainstream. In that 2012 article of Interview Magazine, the Guerilla Girls used the same formula to stay true to their message even with popularity. Back in 1986, they made a poster in the form of a love note written in girly handwriting that read, “Dearest Art Collector, it has come to our attention that your collection, like most, does not contain enough art by women. We know that you feel terrible about this and will rectify the situation immediately. All our love, Guerilla Girls.” This was a direct call to action to rectify the discrepancy they saw in the collections of people who determined what art pieces are deemed important and of value. Skip forward about 20 years to their interview with Interview Magazine and the Guerilla Girls re-did the ‘86 poster for the issues of 2012. The new note, which was published along with the article reads, “Dearest Interview, it has come to our attention that out of 69 interviews you ran last year, only 2 of the interviewees and 6 of the interviewees were women of color. We know that you feel terrible about this and will rectify the situation immediately. All our love, Guerilla Girls.” They are so badass in their clever use of the embrace of the mainstream to further their message. Pretty much no one is safe from the Guerilla Girls until everyone is safe from discrimination and that is alright with me.

Citations:

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