

STEVEN HELLER IS THE WORLD'S MOST PROLIFIC DESIGN WRITER, PRODUCING, SO FAR, OVER ONE HUNDRED BOOKS AND COUNTLESS ARTICLES. And, for the majority of his career, he has done so while maintaining a day job as an influential art director at the *New York Times* (first of the Op-Ed page and later of the Book Review). Notoriously, he begins his workday at 4:00 a.m. Since the late 1970s, Heller has filled such early morning hours documenting and critiquing the history and culture of graphic design, capturing narratives otherwise lost. As an educator he cofounded and cochairs the School of Visual Art's Designer as Author MFA program, and in 2008 he founded sva's Design Criticism MFA. Heller speaks with a recognizable, strongly principled, sometimes controversial voice. Currently he is exploring the shifting terrain of blogs as both an editor and writer for online journals. In the entry below from Design Observer, Heller takes a sharp look at the advertising industry as he delves into the complex relationship between underground and mainstream design.

THE UNDERGROUND MAINSTREAM

STEVEN HELLER | 2008

Commercial culture depends on the theft of intellectual property for its livelihood. Mass marketers steal ideas from visionaries, alter them slightly if at all, then reissue them to the public as new products. In the process what was once insurgent becomes commodity, and what was once the shock of the new becomes the schlock of the novel. Invariably, early expressions of sub- or alternative cultures are the most fertile sampling grounds, as their publications or zines are the first to be pilfered. Invariably pioneers of radical form become wellsprings for appropriation. Rebellion of any kind breeds followers, and many followers become a demographic.

The phenomenon is not new, however. From the beginning of the twentieth century avant-gardes have ceded original ideas to the mass marketplace. In Europe the Weiner Werkstätte, Deutscher Werkbund, Bauhaus, and scores of other reformist schools and movements that sought to better the marketplace with convention-altering arts and crafts fell victim to their own successes. Their collective goal was to raise the level of both manufacture and design while changing timeworn habits and antiquated expectations, yet their ideas became established. The avant-garde is usurped when its eccentricity is deemed acceptable.

In the 1920s Earnest Elmo Calkins, a progressive American advertising executive, argued that quotidian products and advertising campaigns must borrow characteristics from avant-garde European Modern art. Despite the avant-garde's antiestablishment symbolism, cubistic, futuristic, and expressionistic veneers, he argued, would capture the consumer's attention better than a hundred slogans. In the post-World War I era, when renewal was touted, new-and-improved-ness was the commercial mantra. But why waste time, Calkins reasoned, inventing something entirely new when the most experimental artists and designers of the age were already testing the tolerance of new ideas on their own dime. Calkins commanded commercial artists to appropriate and smooth out the edges of modern art, add an ornament here and there to make it palatable for the consumer class, and—voilà!—instant allure and immediate sales.

He further proposed the doctrine of forced obsolescence to keep the traffic in new products moving. Calkins alleged that frequent cosmetic changes to everything from a soap package to a radio receiver cabinet would encourage consumers to discard the old, purchase the new, and replenish the economy. Waste was not an issue. Of course, this required true visionaries, skillful acolytes, and capable mimics. Commercial artists were indeed in the knock-off trade.

Yet when intrepid commercial artists attempted to push the boundaries of design, they had to be cognizant of what industrial designer Raymond Loewy called *MAYA* (Most Advanced Yet Acceptable). Fervent avant-gardists created truly unprecedented forms, but when they are commercialized a kind of trickle-down occurs. Invariably what begins as an elitist subculture follows a predictable trajectory from popular rejection to mass embrace.

Take the sixties psychedelic movement, for example: It was born in a small community that shared proclivities for sex, drugs, and anarchic behavior—all threatening to the mainstream. Kindred visual artists, musicians, and designers developed means of expression that helped define the culture's distinct characteristics. Psychedelic art was a distinct vocabulary, influenced by earlier graphic idioms, that overturned the rigid rules of clarity and legibility put forth by the once avant-garde moderns. Through its very raunchiness it manifested the ideals of the youth culture. For a brief time it was decidedly a shock to the system. But as it gained in popularity (like when it appeared on the cover of *Hearst's Eye* magazine or the sets of *NBC's Laugh-In*) it turned into a code easily co-opted by marketers.

Synthetic psychedelia was manufactured when the visions of the originators were co-opted by the profit motives of entrepreneurs. And what began as a pact of mutual self-interest turned into acts of cultural imperialism.

Underground bands led the way in a commercial whirlpool. They were given record contracts by labels owned by major corporations who wanted significant market share. In turn, the record labels advertised and packaged these bands using the very codes that signaled "alternative" to the growing youth market. Psychedelic design was this code. At first the look was fairly consistent with the original vision and motivation of the avant-garde pioneers. Many album covers of the period are today "classic" examples of true psychedelic design. But within a very short period, as profits began to roll in, youth culture trend-spotters expanded the range, thereby dulling the edge, of the psychedelic style. Psychedelia was no longer an alternative code, it was the confirmation of conformist behavior, a uniform of alienation. The establishment still disapproved of the aesthetics, but it was difficult to be terrified of something that had become so integrated into the mass marketplace. Drugs were still bad, but psychedelia was just decorative. The avant-garde was commodified and the result was a mediocre, self-conscious rip-off. A hollow style that denoted an era remained.

During the ensuing decades the emergence of other confrontational art and design movements, including punk and grunge, that sought to unhinge dominant methods and mannerisms were ultimately absorbed into the mass culture. It has become axiomatic that fringe art, if it presumes to have any influence, will gravitate to, or be pushed towards, the center. All it takes is the followers of followers to cut a clear path to the mainstream. Indeed the mainstream embraces almost anything "edgy," although once the label is applied it is no longer on the edge.

Very little emerging from the underground fails to turn up in the mainstream. Pornography, once the bane of puritan society, is used by the advertising industry for edgy allure. Despite the occasional salvos by morality-in-media groups, all manner of publicly taboo sexuality appears in magazines and on billboards. Popular tolerances have increased to a level where shock in any realm is hard to come by.

Conversely, even before the mainstream began leeching off alternative cultures, the underground satirically appropriated from the mainstream. Today it's called "culture jamming," but in the twenties modern avant-gardists usurped the fundamental forms of commercial advertising by making art itself into advertising. What were Dada, futurist, and constructivist masterworks if not advertisements for their new ideas? In promoting themselves they further expanded the visual languages of edgy advertising, which, not coincidentally, was later adopted by mainstream advertising.

Advertising has been a favored target for social critics. In the 1930s *Ballyhoo*, a popular newsstand humor magazine (and the prototype for *Mad* magazine, which in turn was the father of the sixties undergrounds and the granddaddy of contemporary zines) savagely ripped the facade off the hucksters on Madison Avenue. *Ballyhoo* took original quotidian ads for automobiles, detergent, processed foods, you name it, wittily altered the brand-names (à la *Adbusters*) and caricatured the product pitches to reveal the inherent absurdities in the product claims. Likewise, in the fifties and early sixties *Mad* magazine skewered major brands by attacking the insidious slogans endemic to advertising. They issued such classics as “Look Ma, No Cavities, and No Teeth Either,” a send-up of Crest Toothpaste’s false promise of cavity-free teeth, and “Happy But Wiser,” a slam at Budweiser beer through a parody ad that showed a besotted, forlorn alcoholic whose wife had just dumped him. *Mad* was the influence for *Wacky Packages* (created by Art Spiegelman), which came inside Topps bubble gum packages and used puns on mainstream product brand-names to attack society, politics, and culture (i.e., *Reaganets*, a takeoff on the candy *Raisinets* that looked like the former American president). Paradoxically, *Ballyhoo*, *Mad*, and *Wacky Packages* were all mass-market products, but because of their respective exposure each had an influence on the kids who grew up to produce the icons of alternative culture.

Underground denizens attack the mainstream for two reasons: To alter or to join, sometimes both. Few designers choose to be outsiders forever. Outsiders are, after all, invariably marginalized until the mainstream celebrates them as unsung geniuses. Outsiders may choose to join the mainstream on their own terms, but join they must to be able to make an impact larger than their circumscribed circles. This is perhaps one reason why so many self-described rebels enter mainstream advertising, and now viral advertising. “It’s where the best resources are,” one young creative director for a “progressive” New York firm told me. “It’s also where I believe that I can make the most impact on the future of the medium and maybe even culture.” In fact, on the wall of his office hangs a sheet of yellowing old *Wacky Package* stickers. “This is advertising at its best,” he explains. “Because it is ironic, self-flagellating, and irreverent. The best advertising should be done with wit and humor, with a wink and nod. Self parody is the thing.” Indeed the process has come full circle. Today, designers for mainstream advertising companies, weaned on alternative approaches, have folded the underground into the mainstream and call it “cool.”

This blog entry on Design Observer incited many comments. Visit designobserver.com to read the additional commentary.