

# POST NO BILLS

By Jessica Boerschinger

Is it possible to convey something without it being a part of the media driven culture? Or is media influencing our culture to the point where we will always be fueling it and being fueled by it? In Sut Jhally's lecture "Advertising and the Perfect Storm" he discusses how media has permeated every aspect of our culture and we have become blind to its existence. I would like to propose there are still creative avenues for making, without the influence from capitalist driven media. I will explore the idea of culture jamming in this essay to see if this form of media is still feeding the system Jhally claims "...will be responsible for destroying the world as we know it." And with my visual project I will hopefully represent how media art does not have to be made purely for the sake of advertisements.

At first it feels as though Sut Jhally has a very extreme and negative view on the world and our cultural future. What he claims seems too big and manipulative to be true. However once he begins to break down how advertising dominates our visual/audible world you see how harmful advertising can be and how invasive it has become. He uses the word "colonizing" when describing how advertisements seek out new "real-estate" for their ads. Some ads are uniquely creative while some will make you reconsider the unusual and sometimes offensive ways advertisement can discriminate people.

In recent years, advertising has had to evolve and come up with cutting-edge campaigns with new, interesting locations for their ads, due to the masses becoming accustomed to the hundreds of ads we see and hear every day. For example a few years back the ad agency DDB Auckland altered benches to press an advertisement for Superette, a clothing chain in New Zealand, onto the bare legs of people who would sit on them. They read "Short shorts on sale Superette". An unaware person would then be giving free advertisement for this clothing store while going about their day. This tactic, which I can agree thinks outside the box, is more intrusive than clever. We deserve, especially with our own bodies, to have a choice when it comes to advertising on our person.

Other ways the ad agencies reach people are with a more psychological approach, using emotionalism and the power of cool to manipulate new generations of shoppers. These ads not only show trends, they also push trends on the youth. They are basically teaching us what is "popular" and what we need to buy to become popular. Using celebrities in ads is an easy way to promote what is cool and fashionable, as a culture we idolize celebrities, sometimes even more than our innovative, educational leaders. One example of this is with actress Zosia Mamet, of the show Girls. She was quoted last year at the "30 Under 30" summit in Tel Aviv as saying, "The product is secondary to the storytelling." Her statement was in response to describing her experience in a Kate Spade ad campaign, where her and Anna Kendrick share a "Misadventure" while decked out in Kate Spade clothes and accessories. I believe her statement is to point out that unlike a quick 30 second commercial, this video has a high production value that tells a story. Seeing these celebrities wear these products while having an interesting interaction gives a more lasting impression on the viewer than a fast commercial with a catchy tag line. Every item these women wore in the video began selling out, which signified a successful ad campaign. But I also think it teaches viewers something else and Zosia put it best later in the interview when talking about her 11-minute short film coming out and was asked how they will get the word out about it, her response was by looking for nontraditional distribution routes that pair up with companies "because we personify their brand". This shows next generations that being the face of a brand is what matters and not the story they are telling. I feel it is a complete contradiction to her earlier statement and perpetuates the idea that buying brands will make you "better", more interesting, and more desirable.

But can other groups use these same tactics to inform the masses of real issues? And by using the ad game in their favor is it combating the dire future Sut Jhally portrays in his lecture. A great example is The South African Salvation Army's ad campaign released a year ago, educating the issue of domestic violence in South Africa, while also publicizing The Salvation Army's work with abused and trafficked women. At the time there was a huge internet sensation over a dress that people couldn't stop arguing over, because in some cases it looked blue and others thought it looked orange. First off, this ridiculous dress, which is not an important problem, almost broke the internet. Turning such a trivial "problem" on it's head by having a bruised and battered woman wearing this controversial dress while striking an ad classic pose (laying down on her side provocatively), forces the viewer to consider that there are larger more important issues in the world, ones which need the same energy and outrage as that dress provoked but used to fight against violence towards women. The ad's text reads "Why is it so hard to see black and blue? The only illusion is if you think it was her choice. One in six women are victims of abuse. Stop abuse against women." A phone number for anyone needing support is also included. They aren't selling anything, they are promoting their service, one I believe is free, to help women against violence. In my opinion this is an ad that adds to the betterment of humankind and our culture.



In this world there are a number of issues and genres to identify yourself with, and within those labels, whether it is products of that genre or activists they both will use tactics to play to our emotions of acceptance and ideals. Though I do not agree with all of their advertisement campaign tactics, as a vegetarian I find PETA's action ads and ad parodies a force to be reckoned with. They make provocative commercials and billboard ads to spread the idea of protecting animals and promoting a vegan lifestyle. They will show disturbing imagery of the industries that abuse and kill animals for fashion and food production to shock the consumer out of buying those products. They will also use sex, nudity and celebrities to play to our human desires and show how sexy and cool being a vegan can be. Every year for the Super Bowl, they make a commercial, which is never aired on television and instead has to be released online. This years was about a vegan man outperforming a man who eats meat, in the bedroom. Playing at our desires for pleasurable sexual experiences, the ad influences us to think that a vegan lifestyle makes you better at sex. And though this may be backed up with truth in terms of health statistics it still uses a form of manipulation to sway our thoughts. In PETA's case they are using the ad game for their benefit and to spread their message. It also will influence what people will buy; more vegan products and food, so they are in a way still selling something. Though I believe their message is coming from a place of good, their ads are still feeding the consumerism lifestyle Jhaley is warning us about.

What about activists, artists and culture jammers using these tactics to promote their ideas while also sabotaging the marketing of commercialism? Are their goals to disrupt the capitalist agenda? Groups like Adbusters and the Guerrilla Girls are two creative groups that use art and media to promote their messages and expose those who are pulling the strings of the marketing and art world. With ad parodies and altering products to change their original meaning, these groups inform society of injustice and questions our purchases. For example Adbusters has a shop on their website where they sell artist products and items, including their magazines and other literature. Adbusters is a not-for-profit magazine so the money is for the operating costs of their foundation, which is understandable as running an organization in a capitalist world will still require money.

The one item I question is the recycled shoes that look like Converse shoes (owned by Nike) but stripped of the logo. They are essentially the same shoe, however this version is earth conscious by being made of recycled material and without a brand logo on it there is no advertisement when you wear them, yet the price for this item is over a \$100. Their claim is if you buy their shoes it offsets the market for Converse. "We started selling Blackspot shoes 15 years ago. We wanted to go head-to-head with Nike (you know they own Converse, right?), Adidas, Reebok and their celebrity-driven cool machines. We wanted to reject sweatshop labor and pump up green design. The Ecologist magazine called us "the most ethical shoe store in the world." We've sold tens of thousands of Blackspots ... but we have yet to unswoosh the swoosh. We have yet to seriously cut into the market share of the big shoe companies or cause them any real brand damage. We know it can happen, though." So by putting our money in a product that rejects the big business idealisms, we are helping a group's work towards bringing down those capitalist markets and all the controversy they carry (sweatshop labor, large environmental footprint). Yet, once again they are making a product elitist by having a high price tag. This happens with a lot of more green conscious products or locally made products (think of Whole Foods or locally made clothes stores), they are more expensive because they are made with better materials by individuals or small companies. They need more money to survive. However someone with a low income and a desire to change their buying habits can't afford such products, and stays in the big business system (which the big business anticipates and takes advantage of). If you can only afford to buy Converse sneakers that are \$50, then you will have to buy those over the \$100 dollar sneakers. I understand what Adbusters is trying to accomplish, I don't eat meat in an effort to take money away from factory farming companies. Trying to use capitalist strategies, product and demand, against large capitalist companies can work, it will take a long time to see the dent, but I believe it can make a difference. However I think more will have to be done to change the enormous influence big businesses have on our low-income population. Wal-mart, McDonalds, Coca-cola and Converse will always be there until we raise the minimum wage, promote and encourage locally made products, and educate better spending habits to our lower income areas. All that being said, groups like Adbusters are integral catalysts that show the masses the truth behind these companies and make them accountable for their actions and false advertising.

I appreciate groups like Guerrilla Girls as they are not selling products to make a statement. They explain our historical psyche and reveal to the public why certain artwork is more sought after and shown in museums. Mostly white male artists work have been the center of attention for hundreds of years. If we think back to Shut Jhaley quoting "Deep Throat" in his lecture, "follow the money" we can see who is running the show and hence our culture. Aristocrats, royalty, the French Academy, the church were all run by powerful and rich white men. This has continued to our modern day. Many of the art collectors are rich men, who buy work that speaks to what they know

as valuable or to a personal ideal which they relate to as men. Hence the continuation of purchasing and exhibiting mostly male artist work. I do see a change in this pattern with museums like The Broad having their first special exhibition being Cindy Sherman's work. Also the CEO of the company where I work part time is an art collector with diverse artists such as Glenn Ligon and Mira Dancy. The shift of collectors being older, white men to young tech-driven millennials who purchase work they see on Instagram rather than in a museum or commercial gallery, will show us if the Guerrilla Girls' actions and informative ads have made a difference in the art world. If our culture can see the variety and diversity of artists and their work then what collectors buy and what galleries/museums consider popular will change.





In these instances of “good” groups using ads to promote their messages, does it outweigh the “bad” companies and make for a more hopeful, less destructive world? Shut Jhaley believes ads are the “...most powerful and sustained form of propaganda in human history and if unchecked, its cumulative and cultural affects, will be responsible for destroying the world as we know it.”

I believe my examples so far do make a difference. By putting something in the commercial real-estate other than commercial ads, then we are taking away opportunities of influence from the big corporations. Artists who do this already are street artists, for example JR from our course work who pastes work in sometimes unusual places to speak about people’s differences and change societies stereotypes and discriminatory views towards other cultures. Yola, a street artists from Poland, pastes work that deals with numerous issues, such as intolerance and alienation caused by age, race and sexual orientation. Banksy this past year made a whole artistic amusement park that parodied Disneyland. He called it “Dismaland” and it featured over 50 artists from the U.S., Europe and the Middle East, including big name artists such as Jenny Holzer and Damien Hirst. There were three galleries, tents, dozens of installations, an open-air cinema showing short films and bands like Massive Attack and Pussy Riot.

My visual project accompanying this essay, is inspired by the culture jamming groups and street artists I have mentioned and is based on the term ‘Post No Bills’. Maybe you have seen these three little words painted on construction site walls or around the city you live in or from the Rage Against the Machine song, “Calm Like a Bomb”. The phrase refers to laws which forbid the posting of handbills or advertisement posters on public property. I wanted to explore my own form of culture jamming through the use of this legal term as a way to protect the locations where advertisements would try to take over. When I heard Jhaley’s story of the Mike Tyson fight in Scotland, where his opponent was paid to have an advertisement on the soles of his shoes for when he was knocked out, it made me wonder if ad agencies had any morality. I began to consider where else would they put an add if they could. I would have to beat them to it and put up a Post No Bills sign to keep them from using that location for their ads and slow down the advertising storm. I want to take away valuable real-estate from the ad agencies and remind viewers that our bodies, our neighborhoods and our culture is not for sale.

In conclusion, I do see media art that can tip the scales against the advertising agencies and large capitalist companies. There are artists and activist groups that add to our culture in a beneficial way. Guerrilla Girls, Banksy, and even non-profit organizations like PETA break the monotony of manipulative ads to teach us of what is going on behind the for-profit curtain. As long as we recognize the rules of the ad game, we can break those rules with our own creative campaigns and love of artwork. By filling in the places where ads could go with unique artistic imagery we take away the power of commercial ads and in the long run we will change our culture for the better. It is important to understand the dooming theory of Sut Jhalley’s lecture “Advertising and the Perfect Storm” and to study how media art is used in ads to influence the masses. With knowledge comes the power to alter the course our society has been on, and with the desire to create art there will always be those to combat the forces of big money.

