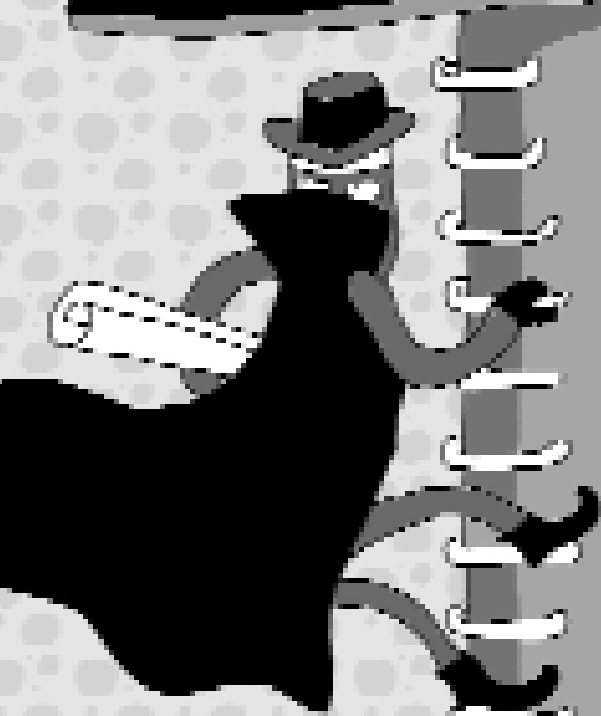


101 TRICKS THE MAIN



culture jomming as subversive recreation

by tom liacos



TO PLAY WITH STREAM

are you: creative?
got time on your hands?
disenchanted with consumer culture?
looking for a fun way to bite the hand that feeds you?
try culture jamming, a favoured new pastime of budding revolutionaries
everywhere! stop bitching about your culture and make it your
playground, make its icons your palette. turn all your nasty
frustration into public art! you'll be glad you did!

the unclassifiable force

Rising in close tandem with our beloved consumer culture, a new resistant strain of dissidence has come to occupy a special, if confusing, place in discussions around art, media activism, and politics. In the discourse around autonomous media, culture jamming is, in marketing terms, a “tweener”. Neither this nor that, it doesn’t fit nicely into any box and cannot be classified readily as a medium of communication.

Though countercultural, culture jamming shadows and heavily references mainstream media icons, especially those of advertising. Though it is often created autonomously, it can also be produced by established NGOs. It can be executed with a marker (on an ad). It can also be created with high-end editing equipment (a TV “anti-ad”). To some it is a tactical form of activist communication. To others, it is a cultural practice—a personal way of acting out that helps moderate the tensions of living in a society that largely does not reflect their social and environmental values.

transportation became established in Europe and North America. The acceleration that accompanied these new developments created an avalanche of information, and industrial societies had to seek out and develop more efficient codes of communication to deal with it all. These factors made symbolic languages more important than ever and gave rise to many new symbolic codes from road map icons to corporate logos, all designed to make quick sense of increasingly complex information. As these languages multiplied, Western cultures, their views of themselves, and their very sense of reality came to rely on the use of symbols as never before.

From the worlds of art and academia, reactions to this new order of signs came quickly. In the early part of the 20th century, artists of the Dada and Surrealist movements made their mark by manipulating symbols and turning visual reality on its head with their creations. Seeing everyday objects recast in absurd contexts, the viewing public got an early taste of the power of the subverted image. In the 1950s and '60s, a network of renegade European artists and intellectuals calling themselves Situationists, gave this artistic practice a name and a mission: *détournement*. They proposed it as a tactic with revolutionary political potential. If reality is made up of signs, they argued, then we have only to turn the signs around to change the society we live in.

Yet, culture jamming is not just about art and academia. It has always also been a scruffy child of the streets. While it was being discussed in ivory towers, there were important pioneers who were “just doing it” in their urban environments. As early as the 1930s, there are records of people walking up to roadside ads and altering them to suit their tastes. In the countercultural 1960s, Yippies were beginning to practice symbolic warfare, like raining dollar bills down on the trading floor to disrupt the New York Stock Exchange. The Billboard Liberation Front—children of the 1970s—have been perfecting the art of high-impact billboard alteration ever since. Activist artists of the 1980s and early '90s, like Barbara Kruger, have made the subversive billboard an art form in itself.

In the past two decades, culture jamming has caught-on far and wide, thanks to the growing reach of alternative media, the accessibility of digital design tools, and the vast social and activist networks now linked by the internet. Sharing newsstand shelf space with HOME AND GARDEN and WALLPAPER across the world since 1990, ADBUSTERS MAGAZINE has been bringing culture jammed images into the mainstream like no one else has.

Since image manipulation and graphic design software have been in the hands of millions of non-professional designers, subverting images or ads has become child's play. What's more, digital image-based culture jams now find their way around the web and into our email inboxes with great facility.

a global virus

The phenomenon of globalization is also doing its part to internationalize subversion along with big-box stores and other modern goodies. One thing is certain: culture jamming is a catchy tactic. It seems that wherever consumer culture sets down roots, culture jamming techniques are quick to appear.

Though culture jamming had its beginnings in the European and North American art world, it has recently taken root in many countries around the globe. There is something very seductive about the ability to respond to all the noise that consumer culture surrounds us with. Social networks have linked cultures so closely that a clever practice on one continent can be quickly adopted on another the next day. The phenomenal spread of The Media Foundation's Buy Nothing Day campaign is such an example. The idea is to pick a date in November and create an anti-event: a focal point of protest against over-consumption. The idea started in Vancouver in the early 1990s and, with some promotion and a minimal budget, it has been autonomously undertaken and organized by culture jammers in over 50 countries.

Interestingly, a new convergence point of autonomous culture jamming has sprung up in Slovenia where consumer culture is still something of a novelty. In 2001, when I was an employee of Adbusters Media Foundation, I was invited to present the foundations' vision of culture jamming at an advertising conference in Maribor. There I came upon a group of culture jamming enthusiasts. These young Slovenians had grown up in a country that had shifted gears rapidly from state socialism to consumer capitalism in ten short years. They were eager to challenge and question their new status quo. Though much of the culture jamming they were seeing came from other cultural contexts, they were quick to see how it could be adapted to the current Slovenian context.

One of these jamming shit-disturbers, Oliver Vodeb, launched Memefest, an International Festival of Radical Communication. Unlike

ADBUSTERS, which mainly publishes its own creations, Memefest's main purpose is to encourage and showcase grassroots culture jams from Slovenia and around the world. It has become a culture jamming academy that brings exposure to jammed messages and gives each participant public feedback on how to refine their message and style.

Year after year, the crop of submissions to Memefest gets bigger and, interestingly, much of it comes from countries where advertising and consumer culture are quite new. The culture jams from a diversity of countries have provided an interesting window for seeing how individuals from different cultures are reacting to the global phenomenon of consumer capitalism. Though many of the culture jams in Memefest are not as polished as those put together by established players, such as The Media Foundation, it is encouraging to see the sheer volume of creativity from around the world because from their different starting points, young subversives are taking back some power to express their culture for themselves. Every time they manipulate a corporate logo or comment on their surroundings, using the visual language of advertising, they chip away at the untouchable aura of the new consumer capitalist system and realize that culture is something that they can actively influence.

what do we make of culture jamming today?

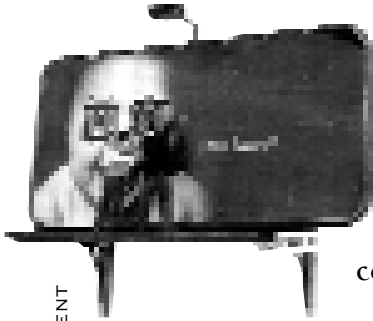
Being an odd kid-on-the-block, culture jamming often raises controversy and questions from all sides of the political spectrum and it is especially criticized by activists of the Left. Since it is so linked to the icons of capitalist culture, it is seen as suspect by some in anti-capitalist movements. They may ask the valid question: "Can something that grows out of the mainstream possibly serve to change it?" Many others are put-off by the mischief and playfulness inherent in culture jamming. They think it makes light of serious issues. But then, why should the element of play be incompatible with fighting for a better world? Culture jamming also has its share of wild-eyed proponents who believe it is a new self-contained approach to activism that will succeed where, in their minds, the outdated tactics of the Left have failed. What it takes, according to them, is a critical mass of people culture jamming at the same time to disrupt the mass media spectacle and eventually derail current consumer culture.

I am somewhat ambivalent about culture jamming's relevance as a political phenomenon. However, I have



developed, through experience, a personal lens for evaluating the effects of culture jamming in different contexts. It is helpful to view culture jamming as an empowering cultural practice rather than a type of media or a form of communication. As a practice, it is largely shaped by individuals who often work in small affinity groups and negotiate a critical path through the modern mediascape.

In this context, the playful and subversive manipulation of mainstream symbols is most meaningful to the culture jammer herself and the group involved in the jamming. By appropriating and manipulating mainstream symbols, the culture jammer cuts the monolithic authority of consumer culture down to size, and gains a certain sense of personal control over it. It is the process of subverting a billboard, creating a mock corporate website, or lampooning consumer behaviour that is empowering and can lead to a larger appetite for other social change initiatives. When culture jamming is used as a vehicle to carry a message to others, some of this transformative effect is lost. After all, as much as the recipients of a pre-packaged message can enjoy the wit of the finished product, they have not taken part in the appropriation and alteration of that message.

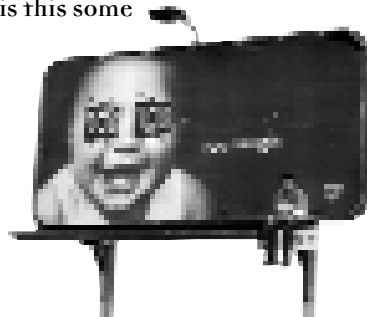


caution: jammers at work

you've started by altering a few tiresome ads with a marker, with some stickers. now, you have a mind to post some slicker messages of your own around town, to push back against the consumer current. you walk through your city differently these days, your critical eye scanning the visual environment. the concrete, the prefab, and the ads that get you down are no longer things that suck. they've become things that need fixing.

months later, you're in the elevator of a major office tower, going floor to floor disguised as a bike courier, delivering self-published notices of corporate misdoing. you realize you're just as stressed as the office types around you. after all, posting these subversive forms is risky and demanding work.

another time, you're climbing up a billboard to do some editing and you get the shakes. some of your usual doubts jump to centre stage: why are you doing this? will you get caught this time? is this some



stupid stunt or a brave act of defiance? will this change minds or just piss people off? too late. you're already slapping up your message before you can help yourself.

you just can't go back to being a consumer, grumbling about the offerings. you've become an addicted cultural producer that meets in bars every week with a like-minded gang of malcontents. your creations are pranks, public art projects, and guerrilla communications campaigns. you've never felt so powerful, productive, and alive.

I have been involved with culture jamming on many different levels but the grassroots street-level adventures I had with the Public Works collective in Vancouver—and a similar short-lived group in Montréal—were, to me, the real deal. Both collectives started with friends and friends of friends who came together out of a shared sense that we lived in cities out of balance. Advertising had grabbed too much of the public space, crowding our consciousness with sexism, greed, empty values—basically, with crap. Our meetings were not discussion groups where we would moan about the status quo. Those that answered the call to form the groups were looking to get busy and do something about their cultural environment. Pronto.

We met regularly in cheap bars. To start we made our shit list, a rundown of the things around town that were pissing us off, like omnipresent ad campaigns, or municipal issues that needed public attention. Next, we would embark on the creative level of our meetings by having a campaign brainstorm session much like you would find at an advertising firm. Ideas would be bounced around for a main message to convey in our jams, then we would discuss the medium, be it a website, street performance, or fridge magnet. Near the end, we broke the task down and arranged a schedule during the following week to pull it off. Then, once the organizing was out of the way, the evening could happily degenerate into silliness and debauchery.

Over time, life in the collective took on a comfortable rhythm. Some projects had weeks of preparation, during which we pulled-off a few quick jams—some SUV bumper-stickering, some environmental violation notices on car windshields, or other small gestures to keep us tied to the energy of action. That was our magic recipe. In one meeting, we would identify



what we saw was wrong, plan out a course of attack, and, within a week or two, have done something about it. Our goals were short term, our rewards were immediate, and we rarely had enough time to bicker.

As a whole, our work ended up being quite diverse. We did alter a couple of billboards and made posters, stickers, and stencils to post around town. We liked to vary our medium as often as possible, to keep things interesting. Over time, we came up with some innovative ways of getting a message across. For example, we installed retractable curtains on bus shelter advertisements in Vancouver, and sculpted a spoof ad snow sculpture looking onto a

popular outdoor skating rink in Montréal.

Some of our jams were more involved. For one action, we produced slick Corporate Charter Revocation Notices bearing the names of offending corporations and then posted them in the elevators of their corporate headquarters and in elevators of the Vancouver Stock Exchange. The following summer, we unloaded a truck full of sod on Vancouver's trendy Commercial Drive to landscape a parking spot—complete with patio furniture and books to read. The parking space lawn was put to use by local residents for the entire day.

As we proceeded, we realized how much fun we were having and how easy it had been to move from idea to action. A look around our table at meetings made it clear we were no superheroes, not especially daring or tough folks. We understood that if we could do it, anyone could. So we created 'zines to share learned tips and to try and spread the culture jam bug to others in our city. Putting the 'zines together was an extension of our creative work, and leaving them around offices or cafes, or wherever else we went, became part of our jamming.

During our active years in both cities, we communicated some important messages. We may have even started local debates when our actions made the news. It was certainly our hope that some people were moved by what

we did, that our jams put consumer culture into perspective, encouraging further questioning. Yet we did wonder from time to time if our actions were pissing people off. To be honest, I think we were more interested in a quick comeback to the mainstream rather than a reasoned argument for change. Certainly, the snarky “you don’t know shit” tone carried by a lot of our culture jammed messages wasn’t designed to win the hearts of hardened conservatives.

I’m quite sure that those who participated in these collectives would agree that the greater share of the benefits from our culture jamming were claimed by the crew itself. As we executed one action after another, we began to walk taller in our cities and to take the mainstream media environment around us a lot less seriously. After all, we knew that if we really didn’t like what we saw day after day, we could get together and alter it within a week. Changing the culture that produced the ads, well, that would take more time.

adbusters: culture jamming consolidated

For almost three years in my life, culture jamming was both a renegade night-time pursuit and a 9-to-5 day job. I worked with Adbusters Media Foundation, the self-designated “culture jammer headquarters.” This nonprofit organization, founded by documentary filmmaker and former marketer Kalle Lasn, started in the early 1990s as a small Vancouver-based outfit, and has since grown into a kind of radical media empire.

While some activists have been trying to be heard in the mainstream for quite some time, ADBUSTERS has had the uncanny ability to insert jams into dominant culture since its inception. After creating their many “subvertizements” (print ads which mimicked mainstream brands) and “uncommercials” (subversive TV and radio spots), Adbusters Media Foundation would first present them to the middle-sized audience of their ADBUSTERS MAGAZINE and website. These subvertizements and uncommercials were often picked up and mass distributed by mainstream media, and over the net from person to person.



Working at this hub of activity and dissemination was, for me, a position of cultural privilege. Judging from outside responses, a good number of others felt empowered by this work as well. In the well-executed culture-jammed products that ADBUSTERS provided, some found a powerful written and visual language for their distaste of consumer culture. This is significant since these same people often felt that their values are misunderstood and misrepresented by the mainstream. But

there have been as many who were continually signalling their disillusionment and dissatisfaction back to ADBUSTERS in letters to the editor and articles in other activist media.

People often painted ADBUSTERS as a big money-maker profiting from subversion.

This, I can tell you, is off the mark. No one at ADBUSTERS, at least while I was there,

was making a decent salary, including Lasn and, being a non-profit organization, all profits

from the magazine and fundraising are fed back into the organization.

This disappointment towards ADBUSTERS may have something to do with the promises of the rhetoric found in the magazine's communications. In its dispatches, ADBUSTERS would often take the tone of a movement leader, hinting at an emerging nation of culture jammers. But was it really spearheading a cultural movement? The Media Foundation put almost all of its energy into producing and packaging subversive media products, doing the culture jamming themselves. The many that responded to ADBUSTERS' call-to-arms wanted a piece of the action but instead came away with a magazine, a poster, a website. As much as it is impossible to package experience—the active ingredient of culture jamming—it is equally impossible to consume it as a product.

what does the future hold for jamming?

Our cultures are changing more rapidly than ever before. What may seem a good idea one moment becomes yesterday's news the next. Though culture jamming has recently been on the rise, some have already written it off as an over-popular tactic that has been co-opted by the main-



stream. But does the tainted image of culture jamming on the larger scale affect the way it can empower the individual who does it on the street? What possibilities does this practice hold for the near future?

It is worth asking how long culture jamming will remain an alternative form of expression. After all, flexible dominant systems, like consumer capitalism, readily co-opt subversion by taking-on the tactic themselves. Take for example Nike's practice of jamming its own soccer shoe billboards in Australia and ascribing the actions to the fictional activist group fighting for "fair play," as in "competitive advantage in sports," not "labour practices."

To address the overenthusiastic beliefs of Kalle Lasn and others who believe that culture jamming will bring about the revolution, I would offer a cautious observation. First, if this vision involves an elite troop of culture jammers bombarding a majority audience of spectators and consumers with more products and messages, then we shouldn't hold our breath. No major social change has ever come as the result of clever messaging alone. Though, in retrospect, we associate passionate slogans and iconography with major social movements. Much of the momentum behind them came from unseen political, demographic, and economic factors—these unseen forces gave rise to messages and not the other way around. However, if it's a question of larger numbers of people doing the culture jamming themselves, then I think there is potential for a significant shift. There is an undeniable transformation that takes place when people break out of their consumer roles and start to creatively talk back at their culture. Through this process, the consumer becomes the producer even if only for a moment. If more people do this, the trend towards cultural self-determination will accelerate. What results from this is anyone's guess but I'm generally in favour of autonomy spreading out as far as possible. With people able to increasingly find their voices amplified through blogs and other online media, I think we're already seeing more self-determination.

Though I'm critical of culture jamming as a means of communication, I think culture jammed products do have the power to seduce the willing into becoming future activists. Perhaps the analogy of the "gateway drug" works here: a mild narcotic that gives the user a taste for something harder, like pot smoking that leads to heroin addiction, except in this case, harder is healthier. I still remember the jolt I felt after stumbling upon my first

Adbusters Media Foundation's anti-car TV ad, placed just after a driving show on the CBC. The sense of vicarious complicity I shared with this bit of media sabotage was one of the experiences that nudged me down the road to culture jamming. Though the first creations of new culture jammers are inevitably riffs off the mainstream, many evolve to include broader tactics and civic involvement as part of their regular activities. They get involved in building sustainable lifestyles, in lobbying for mainstream political change, or attending their first protest, or becoming involved with other autonomous media. In this way, the process of culture jamming may be the first step towards sustained political action, moving the participant from critical engagement to constructive engagement.

Though culture jamming may not be a self-contained recipe for social change, as an autonomous practice, it may be the perfect accompaniment to working for change. It introduces the necessary element of play into our relationship with mainstream society and its media by providing a creative and emotional outlet—a chance to mess with established cultural mores. It helps us live more easily with our culture's idiosyncrasies. It can be an essential morale booster for those who take everything too seriously and it can help keep us going through those long dark hours of world-changing.

notes

To comment on this essay: <http://www.progress.koumbit.net/?q=node/view/124>

web resources

Billboard Liberation Front: www.billboardliberation.com

Culture Jammer's Encyclopedia: www.sniggle.net

Adbusters Media Foundation: www.adbusters.org

Memefest—International Festival of Radical Communication: www.memefest.org



“caution, in 200 metres, starting wednesday, august 7: the deportation of algerians by immigration canada, 2002”

